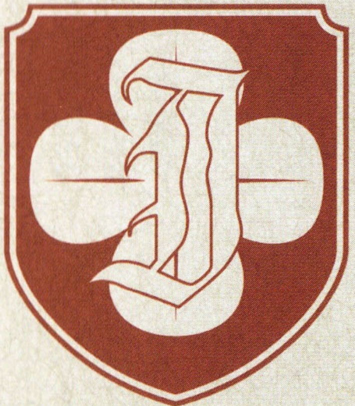
1

とある科学の超電磁砲 SS②

レールガン

Novel Illustrations



とある科学の超電磁砲（レールガン）SS②

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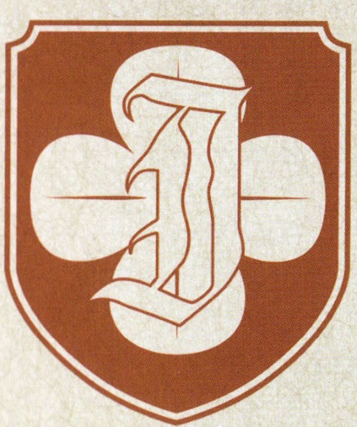

とある科学の超電磁砲（レールガン）SS②

2

GNBA-1782
GNXA-1312

3
とある科学の超電磁砲
レールガン
SS②

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GNBA-1783
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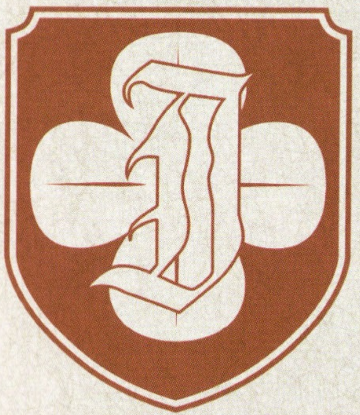
とある科学の超電磁砲（レールガン）SS②



とある科学の超電磁砲（レールガン）SS②

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GNXA-1314

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とある科学の超電磁砲
レールガン
SS②

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GNBA-1785
GNXA-1315

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とある科学の超電磁砲
レールガン
SS②

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GNBA-1786
GNXA-1316

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とある科学の超電磁砲（レールガン）SS②

とある科学の超電磁砲（レールガン）SS②

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GNBA-1787
GNXA-1317

8
とある科学の超電磁砲
レールガン
SS②

レールガン

とある科学の超電磁砲SS②

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GNBA-1788
GNXA-1318

Chapter 1

Part 1

It began back on July 1st.

“A demonstration?” asked her underclassman, Shirai Kuroko, over the phone.

Misaka Mikoto was dressed in her usual summer clothes as she responded over the cell phone at her ear.

“Yes. They said one of Academy City’s seven Level 5s is the easiest kind of sample for others to understand and that my power is the most suitable to be explained of those seven. That’s why I need to go to a cooperative organization and carry out a large-scale performance.”

In reality, a power that clearly exceeded normal physical phenomena like Shirai Kuroko’s Teleportation would be even easier for others to understand, but those who did not understand how espers worked wanted to see someone from the “strongest group”.

Whether she understood that or not, Shirai Kuroko spoke.

“Oh, onee-sama!! So basically, you’re going to be dragged up on stage for some kind of secret human exhibition!? How dirty! I have been truly careless for someone who calls herself your herald!! Ah! It is not too late. I can rush to your side and save you at the perfect moment when you are being displayed half naked!!”

“I’m going to ignore your ramblings. I just wanted to let you know I won’t be back for a week.”

“A-a whole week!? With no break!? That’s simply too much of that kind of erotic thing!! That is not a kind of marathon you can get through on youth alone!!”

“Shut up. I don’t want to do go along with this school play-like thing either. And Kuroko, I really don’t think you can come along this time no matter what you say.”

“Onee-sama, please do not take my power so lightly. If I wanted to, I could sneak into a nuclear shelter.”

“Yeah, but I still don’t think you could do it.”

Mikoto glanced over at a road sign.

However, it was not written in Japanese. It was written in Cyrillic characters.

“Not even you can cross the Sea of Japan to get to Russia.”

Part 2

Some people may have been jealous if they were told that Mikoto was going to Eastern Russia for a school event. They may have complained about unfair treatment if they were told that only she got to go and her classmates were stuck with normal lessons.

However, Misaka Mikoto felt only melancholy.

Simply put, it was not enjoyable.

First and foremost, the school trip had a clear objective. And that objective was solely for the convenience of the school. It did not take Mikoto herself into account.

Not only was she deprived of her freedom, but she did not have any fellow students with which to share the high and low points of the trip.

It was impossible for her to enjoy it.

A school trip with a large group could be enjoyable and a trip on one's own with complete freedom could be enjoyable, but that was not.

(A demonstration, hm?)

Mikoto recalled what the frightening dorm supervisor had told her before she came to Russia.

The trip was part of a plan to strengthen Academy City's connections with its cooperative institutions. In other words, there was a danger of various cracks appearing if she were to fail.

It seemed a disparity in technological levels was behind it all. There was supposed to be a difference of 20 or 30 years in technology between Academy

City and the rest of the world. The cooperative institutions received a certain level of benefits from that, but Academy City did not fully release their information. It was a countermeasure against information leaks, but the cooperative institutions did not particularly enjoy it.

(They’re having a demonstration of one of the Level 5s that are the center of their program in order to emphasize that they are not hiding anything.)

Of course, nothing about Mikoto would actually be analyzed.

It was nothing more than an event to overturn the appearance Academy City had. It was just a trick to make it look like they were not hiding anything. Accurate information on Academy City’s seven Level 5s would not be handed over so easily.

Misaka Mikoto’s value as a living resource was greater than even a handful of jungles.

(…I’m being treated like a large and rare spider.)

Mikoto then noticed someone approaching her.

It was the local guide.

“Oh, hello! Welcome, welcome!!”

A tall woman approached Mikoto while speaking in a cheerful voice. She had long blonde hair, white skin, and a smooth, slender body. She was taller than Mikoto and appeared to be around college age.

“I am Setali S. Skinikia, a security guard. As a member of one of Academy City’s cooperative institutions, I am honored to meet the #3 Level 5.”

She skipped straight past shaking Mikoto’s hand without permission and embraced her. If the woman had been Shirai Kuroko, Mikoto would have fired a high voltage current at her, but she was not sure how to react when it was the first time meeting the person.

“Oh, I just can’t believe one of those Level 5s would come here alone…”

“This is a demonstration to show our trust, so it would be meaningless if I was surrounded by security, don’t you think?”

Mikoto used both hands to gently push away the guide and Setali let out a laugh of unknown meaning.

“Nya ha ha! I heard you have already checked in, so I’m guessing you were looking around at the cityscape. What do you think? Our technology isn’t at the level of Academy City, but I still think it’s a pretty characteristic city.”

“Do you mind if I speak frankly?”

“Of course not.”

“It’s hurting my eyes.”

“Nya ha ha,” Setali laughed again when Mikoto responded honestly and pointed at the side of a building.

The building was not painted in psychedelic colors.

In fact, the buildings in that city were not painted at all.

“It’s called a Semipublic AR,” Setali said while tapping her foot on the walkway beneath her feet. The walkway had the same process applied to it as the wall.

“Simply put, all of the roads, walls, and signs in the city have been made into giant monitors. Many different services are offered to those walking through the city by having the various pieces of information they want added on to the scenery.”

Even then, the flat walls of the buildings had various pieces of information running across them and many arrows were moving across the walkways. They seemed to display the general flow of the people allowing everyone to continue smoothly.

The general goal had been to turn the city’s scenery and terrain into a giant touchscreen and that ingenious idea had been carried out on the buildings, pillars, and other structures. The buildings came in various forms with some flat and some curved, but none of them tried to look distinct with indentations or protrusions. All of the buildings seemed smooth.

“AR or augmented reality is used on the screens of cell phones and PDAs, right? Isn’t that the thing where you look through the camera and additional information is displayed over the scenery? I’ve heard of using it with facial recognition software to make virtual labeling.”

“That way of using it is easy enough, but when you cannot detect it without using specific tools, you end up with the problem of having people essentially sticking abusive labels on people’s backs. That’s why the AR we developed is ‘semipublic’. The technology we used is borrowed from Academy City, though.”

When she thought about it, Mikoto recalled that Tokiwadai Middle School’s sports areas had a system allowing the signs to automatically display information regarding the match currently ongoing. She had also heard that some public baths had walls that had been made into giant monitors.

She looked around lightly.

“But don’t people dislike having others see the information they’re bringing up?”

“Nya ha ha. The images are made so they’re in focus only for the user, so the image is blurred beyond recognition when others look. The level of isolation for the information can be set by each individual user.”

Basically, the building walls, roads, signs, pillars, and all other objects and structures making up the scenery functioned as monitors and each individual resident could obtain information from them.

The difference from a normal electronic display was that each person using it saw different information being displayed. People could be looking at the same sign and be viewing different information.

That technology was not seen in Academy City, but according to Setali’s explanation, Academy City had provided support in its creation.

It was possible that Academy City was using that city as a wide scale test before it went into real use.

“…That doesn’t seem to fit with the advantages of it being ‘semipublic’ that you mentioned before.”

“Making an environment where things can easily be checked on by a third party tends to act as a deterrent. Not that all of the ARs are normally checked, though.”

“Hmm,” responded Mikoto halfheartedly.

The AR did not seem to be operated by any kind of exclusive device. Mikoto randomly waved her gaze down at the walkway at her feet.

With an electronic hum, an image of Mikoto wearing silk lingerie appeared in the walkway.

“Bfh!?” Mikoto started coughing. “Cough cough!! Wh-what the hell!?”

“What is it?”

“No, um, th-this is…lingerie…An advertisement for a lingerie store seems to have popped up.”

“Hm? Nya ha ha. Did you get caught by the automatic changing?”

“W-wait, this is no joke! Is something like this usually displayed in the middle of a pathway like this!? Get rid of it! Get rid of it! How do I get rid of it!?”

“Don’t worry. It’s like I told you. That kind of electronic display is set to be isolated at a high level in the Semipublic AR. Other people can’t see it. All I can see is some other advertisement.”

“Is that so? …No, wait. Before you explain it, tell me how to use this thing!! Even if no one else can see it, it’s still embarrassing!!”

“Your skin, hair, and eye colors are taken from the photo for your ID you had taken when you entered the city. The rest is just a predicted image based on what you look like with clothes on, so the breast size is actually a little off from reality, see? If we wanted to, we could get accurate measurements taken, but people have a right to their privacy. We stop at just an estimated image.”

“I didn’t ask you about that!! And you don’t need to do any of that! It’s not my fault they’re actually smaller than this!! And how can you see it if it’s a Semipublic AR!?”

“Nya ha ha. Well, y’see, if I put my face up against your cheek like this so the height and distance of my eyes are the same as yours, I can actually see what would normally be blurred beyond recognition.”

“You can see it all!? Tell me how to get rid of this AR right now or I’ll blow away the pathway monitor itself!!”

Mikoto was blushing profusely as Setali taught her how to use it. She then succeeded in getting a keyboard-like touch window to display on a nearby show window. She used her fingers to hurriedly switch it to a mode where it repelled any unnecessary electronic advertisements.

“The Semipublic AR can be a bit troublesome, but you’ll have to get used to it while you’re here. Traffic lights, signs, and crosswalk signals are all displayed using it.”

Setali glanced over at the wall of a building most likely to check on some information.

“Do you have any more questions?”

“W-well….” Mikoto sighed. “A place created by the world’s largest shopping mall becoming a large city is not something you just get used to.”

“Nya ha ha.”

As she laughed, Setali slowly started walking. She may have been scheduled to be somewhere. Mikoto followed her.

“This area is still normal. The area with facilities for visitors like hotels and duty-free stores is an aggregation of buildings like a normal city, but the main business facility has become an incredibly huge construction.”

“…So it’s like a gym big enough to cover up an entire section of a city?”

“This was originally an experimental facility for testing economic effects. It was something like a trade show for experimental products. However, all sorts of things needed to be put inside and it became obvious that the area needed would exceed the planned 650 domed stadiums, so it was decided that it would be easier to just register the entire place as a city.”

“So that’s why it suddenly appeared in the middle of nowhere in Eastern Russia, hm?”

“There were a lot of disagreements as to where to build it. It is a huge scale for a business institution after all. You can’t underestimate the economic effects it would have on the area around it. No matter how successful it is, if all the earnings are focused solely on it, the smaller stores in the area cannot survive. It was rejected from all sorts of places until it finally ended up here.”

Setali opened a window on the wall that was adjusted so Mikoto could see it and made it slide along with them as they walked. A map of Russia was displayed within the window.

“Because of where we are, we need exclusive railways, highways, an airport, and hotels for visitors. That only increased the land we needed even further.”

In other words, they regularly got enough visitors to make those things necessary. Mikoto doubted anyone would travel dozens or hundreds of kilometers to buy everyday items, so the shopping mall must have functioned similarly to a theme park.

Just walking through the facility was an event in and of itself.

Even the food corner had such a great selection and quantity that it became a sight one would not normally get to see.

“…So I guess it’s something like the world’s largest window shopping facility.”

“True. This is an extremely large shopping center with anything you could want, so there are plenty of goods that you would normally never see like professional tools from any industry you can think of. Just seeing an area full of such rare things may look like a fantasy to some people.”

Setali zoomed in the displayed window bringing up a general list of the areas within the city.

The basic makeup of the city was split into two blocks. One block had daily necessities and the other had entertainment and luxury items. The transportation and lodging facilities such as the airport, the terminal stations, and the hotels were focused around the outside edges of the city.

The buildings for hotels, duty-free shops, and other such places were lined up seeming to surround the main large business facility.

A few points of light on the map must have been the areas with highly specialized products that Setali had mentioned.

Unlike in a tourist spot in Japan, the signs did not display things in many different languages. It was all in Russian. It was possible they could be set to other languages via the Semipublic AR, but Mikoto felt no real need to do so.

“But the visitors here travel a long way to get here, so they tend to go beyond window shopping in the end. They seem to think they should buy something since they came all the way here. In fact, the airports take on more packages for delivery than they do passengers.”

“If the president of a shopping channel or a discount store heard that, they would probably be frantically trying to analyze your system.”

“Well, the city exists to research that kind of thing. Money comes first!” Setali yelled out in an unrefined voice. “Have you ever noticed how there can be multiple department stores on the same street, but what sells and what doesn’t is different with only a few hundred meters of difference? Two of the same chain of convenience store can exist within a few dozen meters of each other, but for some reason one of the two will sell a lot more than the other. Putting things on sale can make people think the goods are ‘cheap’, so no one will buy them. If you put new and used accessories next to each other, the new ones will sell better despite having the higher price. …Well, there’s a lot to commerce. There is something that alters how well something sells making it either prosper or fail. This city aims to thoroughly research the psychological effects related to money. Customers pleasantly buy things and that data is used to calculate what environment allows customers to gather more easily and what environment has the opposite effect.”

It was a simple concept to understand because the city had a simple goal.

Drawing in large amounts of visitors like a world-famous theme park allowed them to get even better results for their research.

The city had to be overflowing with various ingenious ways of getting people to go past window shopping and actually buy something. If you did not watch out, your hotel room could end up filled with strange souvenirs.

Mikoto sighed.

“So I’m doing my demonstration here.”

“Yes.”

“(…Well, it’s not bad being the representative of Academy City, but being forced to do things for the convenience of the adults is a real pain.)”

“(…Well, from the records we received from Academy City, this girl is the most normal, has the easiest to understand power if you’re just seeing it, and has the most reasonable personality. …The other Level 5s would definitely ruin this.)”

Mikoto and Setali both muttered to themselves.

Finally, Setali changed the subject.

“As I said before, there was a problem regarding pressure on smaller stores with the advance of larger facilities such as this one. Searching for a solution to that is one of the themes of our research. …We deal with Academy City quite a bit. We may only receive the downgraded technology, but the quality is still better than anything else. Finding a way to reduce the friction between Academy City and its surroundings has more value than just as an economic effect.” Setali shrugged lightly. “But other than that, this place is surprisingly similar to a normal city. I work as a security guard, but I deal with a lot more dropped items or lost children than I do any real incidents. There are even some urban legends.”

“Urban legends?”

“Nya ha ha. There are all sorts of them. Lately, there’s been one about a ‘very valuable orange’.”

“?”

Part 3

Saten Ruiko was a middle school girl that loved rumors.

Also, she was the type that pursued the rumors that were in truly bad taste and would anger the PTA types.

“Uiharuuu. Are you working on Judgment stuff again? You sure work hard for something you don’t get paid for.”

She was calling to a girl named Uiharu Kazari. Her characteristic trait was the great amount of flower decorations on her head and she was in the process of battling a PDA in order to make some sort of document.

“Saten-san, you chase after rumors despite that not getting you any money.”

“But that’s my hobby. If someone else told me to do it, I’m sure I wouldn’t,” said Saten arbitrarily turning aside Uiharu’s comment. “That boring paperwork doesn’t matter, so come with Saten-oneechan so we can go chase after the rumor about the very valuable orange.”

“…What kind of title is that? It clearly has some hidden meaning to it.”

“Listen, Uiharu!! A traveler was on an overseas trip when he found a souvenir shop in a certain country that was selling a very valuable orange!! It was said to be a mysterious orange that naturally grew in value just by having it!!”

Uiharu’s expression seemed to be saying “here she goes again” and she continued working on her PDA without looking up.

Saten continued speaking regardless.

“So the traveler bought the orange thinking it was a good luck charm or something, but when he got home and put it in his house, it started squirming.”

“…”

“The traveler was curious, so he went to the souvenir shop’s website and emailed the shop to check. The response said that the orange had over 100 eggs of a valuable type of ant called a crimson long-legged army ant laid inside. It said that it would naturally rise in value because those would hatch. …As the traveler read the email, the orange burst open!”

“Gyaaahhh!! That’s creepy! You really do love that kind of terrible story, Saten-san!!”

“Apparently, those crimson long-legged army ants love the damp and humid environment of Japan. It seems they’re quietly spreading their breeding area and if they aren’t quickly found and exterminated, the entire main island of Japan will be buried in giant army ants…”

“Stop telling me that kind of thing!! I-it’sh just a rumor!! Sho I don’t have to worry!!”

“Uiharu, those flowers on your head look like they would attract bugs. Bugs with six huge legs like this.”

“Gyaaahhhhh!!”

Part 4

Mikoto’s face paled a bit upon being told the story of the very valuable orange by Setali. Even though she knew it was just a rumor, it was still creepy.

“Nya ha,” Setali laughed in her characteristic way. “It’s an expansion of the idea of an invasive species destroying the ecosystem of a land. The part about having to quickly find them and exterminate them is a stereotypical threatening message. The story has only spread through this city since it is a shopping mall where anything can be bought. Once you know what an urban legend is based on, it suddenly loses its impact and the fear it causes fades away.”

“It’s still not a very happy story,” Mikoto said in an exhausted way.

Setali seemed to realize that Mikoto was not interested, so she touched a nearby wall in order to change the subject. She seemed to be using her fingers to search for something on the AR and a report appeared on the screen.

“Let’s see, how about we talk about your schedule. Your itinerary, security postings, the progress of the demonstration, and other things are all saved in the online database. You can view any of those things at any time using your guest ID and the personal password we had you set when you entered the city.”

“So the actual demonstrations will be on the third and fourth days. And the rehearsal is on the second day.”

“Think of the first demonstration as for the press and second as for the general public. What you will be doing in both will be the same. …Are these people okay for your security?”

“It’s not like I can really say no, now can I?”

The point of the demonstration was to reduce friction between Academy City and its cooperative institutions regarding the level of technology open to them. If only Academy City personnel were deployed around Mikoto, it would be seen as Academy City not allowing anyone else near their espers which would not reduce the friction.

That was the reason that no Academy City adults such as the dorm manager were accompanying her.

Of course, the Academy City adults may have been very nervous about the whole thing. After all, it would be a major issue if Academy City's #3 was kidnapped, harmed, or had her DNA map stolen. It would be a loss of a living resource and it could have an effect on the international relationship between Academy City and its cooperative institutions.

As proof of that, the following happened as Mikoto headed back to her hotel where she would part with Setali.

"So what am I scheduled to do now?"

"Nothing. You're restricted from leaving your room until tomorrow. Academy City asked that we make sure you refrain from taking any actions of your own free will. If you touch the walls or floor to search for some information, I think it will just come up with the documents Academy City sent over."

"Seriously?"

"I would think you would be more knowledgeable of the details when it comes to Academy City."

"Um…I've come all this way to a major sightseeing area, so I was kind of thinking of having a look around."

"Nya ha ha. There will be some guards stationed in front of your room and some of the responsibility lies with me, so please restrain yourself from going out for fun tonight."

And like that, Mikoto was escorted back to her high class hotel and thrown into her room on the 20th floor. Just before closing the main door to the hotel room, Setali peered in through the gap.

"We may not be as good as Academy City, but our guards are quite skilled, so don’t try anything.”

“Yes, yes, I get it.”

The self-locking door clicked shut. It was painfully clear how Mikoto was being treated. There was no other exit from that room, the entrance to the ventilation ducts were too small for a human to pass through, and only a sheer 20 story drop awaited one out the windows.

“Vahh.”

Mikoto let out a breath now that she was left alone.

She collapsed face up on the bed.

It was a real pain in the ass.

It was not that she did not want to do the demonstration. She had no complaints about going to Russia, either. However, she was completely bound by the schedule the entire time. It was all just for the convenience of the adults. If she did not have a minute to spare, she could understand, but she was being sealed up during what could have been free time simply because of what was scheduled for later.

Just to be sure, she used the Semipublic AR while still lying on the bed to check on what actually was scheduled for later. As she expected, it was nothing interesting.

It seemed that on the days of the demonstrations, she had to get up on stage wearing a lovely dress and show off some of her skills. She would be covered in sensors at the time, but according to the preliminary calculations Mikoto had done, devices of that level would not be able to obtain data useful for developing psychic powers.

In other words, Academy City was just putting on a show to say that there was no friction between them and the cooperative institutions. They were not actually handing anything over.

Everything was for the convenience of the adults.

It had no real value.

If you had no complaints about that, you might as well just announce you were running for student council president.

(Peter Wellgo, Ran Ryuushu, Eclek Savoge… It looks like they’re all from the diplomatic departments of overseas cooperative institutions. I guess my audience will be made up of stubborn people, too.)

Mikoto’s face grew cloudy as she viewed the list of invited people that was being displayed on the ceiling.

(Viner? What…? Are they holding a weapons show along with the demonstration? I guess that’s how psychic powers are viewed by those outside the city.)

“I can’t just stay on my best behavior,” Mikoto muttered as she lay face up on the bed.

She sat up and looked around.

Once she had decided that she was going to have some fun, that was what she was going to do.

Mikoto looked around and then approached the window.

She was on the 20th floor.

“So am I a captive princess or something?”

Normally, that would be an impossible height to escape from. There were no balconies on the wall. In fact, there were not even any protrusions or rainspouts. It was most likely made that way to heighten the effect of the Semipublic AR. The excessively flat wall had the same sense of height telling one to not get near it like an old castle or an office building.

There was nowhere one could get a foothold and there was no point around which to tie a rope.

However…

“They never seem to realize…”

Mikoto opened the window wide and leaned out.

“…that I can create as many footholds as I need using magnetism.”

She unhesitatingly jumped out.

The bottom of her loafers scraped against the wall while she was in a pose like she was skiing. Academy City’s #3’s sightseeing trip began.

Part 5

The powerful magnetism caused the AR effects on the hotel wall to be slightly distorted, but there were no major issues.

Mikoto landed after heading vertically down the wall from 20 stories up and then looked around.

“Now then, where should I go? …This is a cooperative institution, so they might have a Russia exclusive Gekota.”

She started walking without having decided on a destination.

The hotel was near the edge of the city. All of the surrounding buildings were other hotels or duty-free shops.

High-rise buildings could not be constructed in the center of the city and the objective of the city was to be the world’s largest shopping mall. It covered a vast area, but it was not all that tall. It was only about 5 stories above the ground.

The large center facility was divided into two major facilities.

Each area was something like a giant shopping mall much larger than a domed stadium. The buildings were not perfectly rectangular. Some parts were just five-story boxes, some parts were shaped like donuts with giant courtyards in the middle, and some parts had large atriums that sank down below ground level.

(Overall, it’s kind of like a giant box that has been eaten into in various places.)

650 domed stadiums.

It was such a vast area, that one might have to ride the subway to get from one store to another. There was also more than one parking lot. Each parking lot was the size of one for a championship soccer match and there was one in each cardinal direction of the giant facility.

Mikoto entered one of the large shopping mall areas.

It did not seem like just a giant building.

For one thing, it was simply too vast.

The insides of the shops were displays full of products just like at a supermarket or a department store. However, there was an overwhelming amount of them making the stores almost seem like a type of labyrinth. It was amazing that each and every thing on display was actually for sale and not just a decoration.

The pet shop was as large as a zoo, the flower shop was like a botanical garden, and the temporary day care for small children was like a small scale amusement park. Mikoto had never before heard of a day care that had a roller coaster inside.

Even though it was evening, there were of course a large number of people there.

That may have been because it was like a theme park or it may have been because the area had no sense of the sunset.

Their prided Semipublic AR functioned as special monitors. The display used RGB instead of CMYK. In other words, the building walls, the path at one’s feet, and everything else glowed. A normal night scene was a collection of points of light, but in that city it was a collection of panels of light. There was simply so much light that any sense of dimness was done away with.

In fact, the less light there was in the surroundings, the more the presence of the Semipublic AR was forced upon you.

The races of the people walking along were varied. It was not just a general mix where some were white, some were black, and some were Asian. Misaka could see some distinctive builds even among those different groups.

(I see.)

Mikoto nodded as she looked around that building that was more a sealed off commercial district than a giant shopping mall.

(With an area this big, there would be a lot of lost children and pickpockets. I can see why they need those security guards in addition to the police. Having workers at the shops double as security was probably inspired by our Anti-Skill.)

And then Mikoto added another comment in her mind.

(…I can see how this would end up being a treasure trove of urban legends.)

There were places about which urban legends naturally popped up such as schools, hospitals, and tunnels. Large amusement parks and shopping malls also fell under that category. Perhaps because children got lost in those places on a daily basis, a lot of the stories about those last two involved human trafficking. Mikoto was not too knowledgeable about that kind of rumor, but even she knew two or three of that sort, so they were probably a fairly major genre.

Urban legends.

A very valuable orange.

(That rumor may have spread among tourists who came here because things are sold here that are not in other places. They may have thought that something like that could be found here. Well, there's no point in thinking about a completely baseless rumor.)

Mikoto continued to walk around that foreign city as it turned to night in hopes of seeing something she had never seen before. After heading up some stairs, she realized she had entered an odd area. Instead of the vast large scale image of the places she had seen before, the shops lined up there were all quite small. The roof was narrow and the entire area seemed rather cramped. The shopping district a ways from the main streets seemed like the entire place had been dragged indoors.

"What is this place?"

She looked around, but she saw no signs. For an instant, she felt the area was quite inconvenient, but then she recalled the Semipublic AR. That city was a place where one could obtain any information one needed.

She brought her hands over to a thick round pillar and called up a keyboard. She typed in "area map" and a detailed diagram of the area immediately appeared on the pillar.

(Hmm… So they've invited in a few shops from outside the city. I guess it's an economic experiment about the fusion of local stores and new stores.)

Small shops were lined up on either side of the long narrow passageway, but old-looking shops and shiny new chain shops alternated like Morse code. The experiment was most likely not seeing which one did better. They were likely trying to see how to get both to get even business.

New shops would not necessarily sell more.

For instance, in an area with a lot of brand new sushi or ramen shops, the customers would all head to the one old-looking shop.

Their goal was to analyze that to the point of knowing the actual values involved rather than just the common knowledge so they could always gain that effect.

(Trying to figure out what their ulterior motives behind things are as you walk along can be kind of fun.)

However, she would be lying if she said she was not mainly trying to see if she could find a special Gekota you could not find elsewhere.

She could feel her destiny for a once-in-a-lifetime encounter that transcended probability theory.

Encountering that Gekota would be nice.

Mikoto looked around thinking about entering a random shop. She changed the AR setting so that it would display information on her surroundings as she looked around. Matching her gaze, the signs for various shops were displayed one after another on the wall.

Suddenly, Mikoto's gaze froze.

The data for one of the many signs was in Japanese which was rare for that city.

It read: Snack and Souvenir Shop Nihon Daruma.

Mikoto had just been thinking of that city as a treasure trove of urban legends and then that showed up.

I have no intention of explaining in detail, but it is a rather famous story in Japan, so you should be able to easily find it by searching on the internet.[1] However, it is a rather creepy story, so I do not recommend it. Do not look it up.

“…Are they trying to draw people in?”

It was a well-known rumor in Japan, so they may have looked it up on Japanese websites or the store may have had been opened by someone from Japan like a sushi or nabe restaurant.

However, even if it was shocking, the store won by catching people’s attention.

Mikoto was at a loss for words for a bit, but once the shock wore off, she started to get curious. For one thing, she had been wandering around that foreign city at night in hopes of finding something with some impact. Mikoto headed for the shop like she was being sucked in.

The door slid open.

The inside was odd, too. It was a lot like a Japanese convenience store. The clean and modern interior seemed unnatural. The shelves for the products were the same as a normal convenience store, but the products themselves were clearly different.

On the magazine racks were old books made of parchment with mysterious cursive writing in an unknown language.

Instead of plastic bottles in the glass door refrigerators covering one wall were bottles filled with a mysterious liquid as well as things like snakes and insects.

Next to the register where heat insulated containers for hot snacks would usually be were small dried heads of animals.

Nothing there was normal.

It could perhaps be described as occult.

Everything there would be laughed off as ridiculous if it was listed as a mail order product on the back cover of a manga magazine. However, with so many of them gathered and logically laid out within the store, there was a sense of unity to it all.

“Yah ho ho!”

The girl at the register gave a meaningless cry of greeting.

The girl was shorter than Mikoto but actually had breasts, so she annoyed Mikoto.

“Are you a tourist, miss? Well, I guess everyone in this city is a tourist. Although it’s rare for a Japanese girl to come in after seeing that sign. Are you starving for some stimulation?”

“What about you?” Mikoto said as she poked at something that looked like a crystal packed in plastic. “With that name and this design, I thought someone Japanese was running the store, but I guess I was wrong.”

The girl at the register had white skin and long black hair with just the ends braided. However, her eyes were blue and her skin color was not that of a normal Japanese person. She had the characteristics of a European, of an Anglo-Saxon.

Mikoto looked at the nametag on the girl’s chest that had her name written in hiragana.

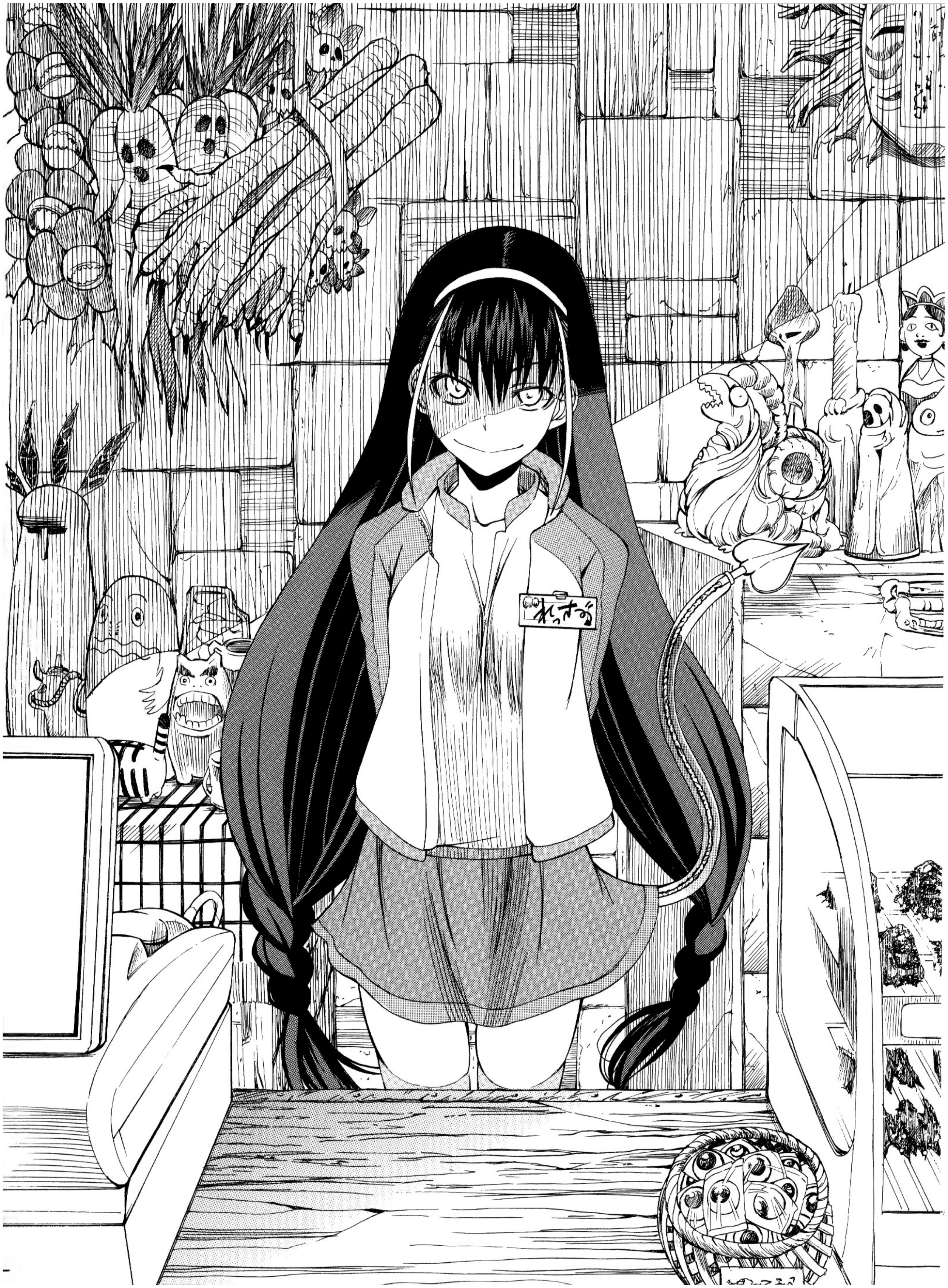
“Lessar?”

“Yup, I’m Lessar-chan. We have all sorts of souvenirs. And don’t worry. Everything we have here won’t get you caught up at customs. So just loosen the purse strings.”

“You say that, but…”

Mikoto looked around the horrid convenience store again.

Instead of snack foods, dried bats wrapped in plastic were lined up.


れっさず

"How am I supposed to tell what's good or not?"

"It's like an amulet. You just need to use your feelings to choose the one that matches your situation the best. I don't really like putting added value on art or antiques."

"Hmm… This selection goes a bit far for just grabbing people's attention, don't you think?"

"They're souvenirs, so just random things are fine, right? And the things here are nothing more than materials. I don't think you could make a proper spiritual item from them."

Mikoto did not understand what the girl named Lessar was talking about.

Was she using terms commonly used in fortune telling magazines or something?

"I don't think I need to buy anything that's sole purpose is to bury one's troubles."

"Hm? Are you the type that denies the effects of good luck charms? But I think normal convenience stores are more or less the same. You go to the store because you feel you need something and then buy items to make up for your general dissatisfaction. Isn't that all those everyday products are? This store specializes in the things that cannot be seen, but is otherwise the same."

"I see. So this really is a convenience store?"

"Yes, it is."

"Well, at any rate, it doesn't look like I'll find a Russia exclusive Gekota here."

"I have no intention of stocking anything I have no interest in or knowledge of. After all, this is basically just a hobby. But I will always be here. This is basically a convenience store, so come back if you ever have any kind of dissatisfaction similar to if you were to suddenly want some ice cream during this warm night."

"I see. Well, I have no worries right now."

“Worries fluidly come and go. Even if you have none now, that will not necessarily be the case later.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

Mikoto headed for the sliding door. When she stepped on the floor mat, a soft electronic tone sounded. Even that was just like in a normal convenience store.

However, the words of the worker named Lessar alone were not stereotypical.

“Oh, one more thing. Watch out for oranges,” she said.

“Hah?”

“Watch out for oranges.”

With the smile of the service industry on her face, Lessar repeated her warning.

Part 6

Mikoto’s frank impression of the store could be summed up in the word “strange”.

She had thought there might be some occult stores like that outside of Academy City and overseas, but it was still strange. She may have been affected by the atmosphere of the world’s largest shopping mall that gave the baseless impression that anything could be found there.

But then…

(If I stay away too long, the guards may figure out something’s wrong from the lack of noises. I probably need to be heading back.)

Over the next three days, she had a rehearsal, a demonstration for the press, and a demonstration for the public. She was of course planning to duck out when she found an opening, but she would still not be able to play around as much as that day.

Mikoto started regretting not having taken a picture of that store with her cell phone and then decided to head straight back to the hotel.

However, not everything went as planned.

On her way along the path leading to the exit of the large shopping mall area, Misaka Mikoto was forced to come to a stop.

This was not because the exit had been sealed.

Nor was there a thug or someone blocking her way.

At that time, in that instant, everyone but Mikoto was coming and going through the entrance like nothing was happening. Despite it being late in the evening, a large flow of people was formed by the great number of people entering or exiting the facility. Parents were heading for an amusement park with their kid who was waving a helium balloon around. Tall lovers were huddled together and talking while pointing at the floor. They were likely using the Semipublic AR to call up a guide to the facility. Mikoto was the only one that stopped.

There was a single reason.

There was something small that gave her an uncomfortable feeling lying on the floor near the entrance.

Lying on the floor as if someone had accidently dropped it was a single large orange.

"…"

It was an unpleasant coincidence.

There was a boy carrying many paper bags full of souvenirs and a girl walking into the facility while biting into a hamburger, but Mikoto alone was purposefully regulating her breathing.

Mikoto recalled the story she had heard from Setali about the very valuable orange. In the story a traveler sightseeing in a foreign country bought an orange that had the eggs of a large kind of ant packed inside of it. Mikoto felt the rumor should just be dismissed as absurd, but she could not get it out of her head.

(That…couldn't really be true…right?)

Mikoto tried to deny it in her head, but it still bothered her. She could not just overlook it.

She slowly looked around, but there was no store selling fruits nearby.

While looking at the orange that looked oddly isolated just lying there on the floor, Mikoto approached a nearby thick pillar.

The Semipublic AR reacted to her presence.

She searched for "crimson long-legged army ants".

Mikoto had no real plan behind doing so.

What looked like an encyclopedia page opened up.

Crimson Long-Legged Army Ants.

2-3 cm long. As their name suggest, they have characteristically long legs. They also possess 5 mm fangs.

Their bodies are black, but their six legs are bright red. Also, the males have transparent wings.

Carnivorous.

In this rare species, both males and females are soldier ants. They prefer mammals to other insects or arthropods. They have been found within the flesh of fruits, but this is not because they are eating the fruit. It is speculated that they enter the fruit when a colony is destroyed due to lack of food so that they can camouflage themselves and more likely capture some prey.

As army ants, they have no specified nest and instead construct a colony of around 50,000-100,000 ants with the queen in the center. They then wander around a set area in search of prey.

While hiding within a fruit, a stimulus to the fruit can remove the queen's limiter causing the eggs to hatch with a seemingly inexhaustible supply. When that happens, a great number of queens have been reported to appear despite queens usually being limited to one.

There have been numerous reports of such out of control colonies attacking human habitations.

In the Second International Conference on the Prevention of Harm from Dangerous Insects, it was decided to work on bringing down the number those incidents to half what they are in 10 years' time and Academy City is providing technology to help.

-> *Related: The Hennis Village Incident.*

Mikoto knew that only regret would await her if she clicked on that link, but she did so anyway.

She was taken to a video sharing site.

She could not tell the exact location shown, but it seemed to either be Africa or South America. The area had small spots of short vegetation growing on dried earth. A few run-down wooden buildings were standing there.

A black and red sandstorm was blowing.

Below that, people with tanned skin were running about.

It almost looked like they were trying to avoid sparks from a conflagration, but they were not. The large amounts of red light were squirming around. They were bright red insect legs. Thin, transparent wings were moving.

Doors closed one after another.

The people who luckily managed to slip inside the buildings beforehand were the lucky ones.

However, the people who had the doors slammed in their faces were…

“…!!”

Mikoto slammed her palm against the thick round pillar. Her strike had enough force to break a panel of glass and the Semipublic AR took it as the command to close the window and complied.

Her breathing was erratic.

She had not been able to watch that video any longer.

Instead of those images of the past, Mikoto turned her gaze on something from the present.

She looked over at the oddly isolated orange.

She thought she saw its skin move slightly.

“…Eh…!?”

It really may have only been her imagination.

It also could have been due to the minute vibrations from the feet of the people walking around it.

But whether it had been a mental effect or physical movement, that vague appearance of movement did not stop with that one instant. Mikoto continually saw the same thing happening. A strange chill ran down her spine.

What if that story had been true…?

(…I need some kind of sealed container.)

Mikoto looked around.

(If I have a something like a microwave that can contain it, then the contents of the orange won't be scattered around even if it does explode.)

That shopping mall had all sorts of things for sale. They had to at least have the basic kinds of appliances sold in department stores. The problem was that the stores were so large she had no idea where to find what she wanted.

Mikoto operated the Semipublic AR on the floor and a twisting arrow appeared there indicating where the appliance corner was. Mikoto looked back at the orange lying on the floor and…

"You've gotta be kidding…" she muttered.

It was gone. The orange was gone.

Mikoto frantically looked around for it. A lot of people were coming and going through the entrance like a shopping district on a holiday. It did not seem that the orange had been trampled underfoot, but she could not tell where it had gone. Someone may have kicked it.

And then she heard children's voices. She could not see the children because of all the people, but she clearly heard the innocent voices of children speaking in Russian.

One was a boy's voice and the other a girl's voice.

“What’s with this? It’s all squishy.”

“What did you get that for? Are you going to eat it?”

“Of course I’m not going to eat it. I found it on the floor. I’m gonna kick it all the way to the car.”

Mikoto’s head shot up.

She really could not see the ones speaking. She hurried in the direction of the voices which led her to the exit.

“Wait,” Mikoto called out despite not knowing who she was speaking to as she pushed her way through the crowd.

She was in such a panicked hurry that she was tempted to emit a weak electrical current, but she resisted.

The eggs forming the colony of crimson long-legged army ants were hiding within the fruit waiting for some prey.

A stimulus to the fruit would remove the queen’s limiter causing the number of ants to increase seemingly endlessly. The normal limit of a single queen would also disappear.

Once that happened, it would end like the video she had seen on that site…

“Wait!!”

Mikoto charged out of the building.

There was a parking lot large enough to be at a major soccer match, but tools for home gardens such as spades and buckets were lined up nearer the exit. The crowd was cutting around various corners creating a large flow of people.

(The voices sounded around 10, I guess. The boy’s voice didn’t sound like it had changed yet.)

She looked around.

There were a lot of parents with their children. There were even quite a few around the age of 10. Some were holding their parent’s hand, some were waving around balloons, and some were riding on their parent’s shoulders.

The boy had mentioned kicking the orange.

Mikoto looked down to the ground and quickly moved her gaze into the distance.

She saw something orange-colored fly by.

“There it is!!”

About 200 meters ahead, a family of four was walking in one section of the packed parking lot. The orange was at the boy’s feet. He must have kicked it again and again. Part of the skin had torn off. The orange was squirming eerily. It looked a bit like a heart about to die.

It looked like something breathing was about to burst out of it.

There was no time.

Mikoto had no idea how many crimson long-legged army ants were hiding within the orange, but she did not want to think about what kind of damage would be done to the boy that was kicking the orange were it to burst and there were even 50 or 100 of them inside. And if even a few of the ants that would scatter in every direction were allowed to escape, they would begin breeding after only a short period of time creating a seemingly infinite number of them.

She could fire a lightning spear or her Railgun.

A few options came to mind, but none of them would work.

She may be able to obliterate the orange, but that level of attack would only scatter the tiny ants around making it entirely pointless.

She could not solely rely on her power.

“…!!”

Like she was juggling a soccer ball, Mikoto lightly kicked up a tin bucket lying in the outside area for home garden products.

She manipulated magnetism.

An invisible force caused the tin bucket to swing around like a wrecking ball on a chain.

A heavy sound echoed out like when one swung a bat through the air.

The bucket flew down from diagonally above the boy, flew upside down just past his shoulder at high speed, and struck the ground covering up the orange on the parking lot ground. A metallic clang rang out as orange sparks flew.

“Ee!”

“Out of the way!!” yelled Mikoto, but she clicked her tongue immediately afterwards because Japanese wasn’t going to get through to the boy.

Luckily, the family of four was paralyzed by the sudden occurrence. Their lack of motion made things easier for Mikoto.

Purple electricity flew from her bangs.

With a feeling like the power in her forehead was being released externally, she controlled her power and the charged high voltage current was released all at once.

A loud noise similar to a gunshot rang out.

Mikoto put herself between the boy and the bucket and forced him away. She kept her gaze on the upside down bucket.

(I-is it over…?)

She then heard a slight scraping noise.

It sounded like claws scraping at metal.

Mikoto’s shoulders jumped and the noise continued.

It was coming from the bucket.

From inside it.

From within.

The scratching noise continued and continued and continued.

(You don’t mean…)

“They’re trying to eat through the metal bucket…!?”

One shot had not been enough to annihilate them.

The simple command telling them to frantically survive gave the ants greater leadership.

Mikoto stepped forward and fired two more high voltage currents into the bucket. She stepped on top of the bottom of the upside down bucket with one foot. She then poured a massive amount of electricity into the bucket just to be sure.

The tin bucket conducted electricity.

The inside would have been transformed into an environment more severe than an electric chair.

“…”

After firing over 20 electrical attacks at it, Mikoto finally stopped. The noise and light had been so great that even the onlookers remained silent.

She remained still for 30 long seconds with her foot still on top of the tin bucket.

She could not grasp the situation like that.

Without removing the bucket, she could not check to see what had been inside the orange or if they had been properly exterminated.

When dealing with bombs, checking to make sure it was truly not functioning was as nerve-wracking as deactivating it in the first place. It was a similar feeling to that.

Mikoto slowly took her weight off of the bottom of the upside down bucket.

She gulped.

She brought the bottom of her foot to edge of the bucket and pushed ever so slightly. The bucket moved a bit from just that. It was not a perfect defensive wall. Just tapping it with her toes had been enough to almost knock it over.

She pushed harder.

The bucket wobbled quite a bit and then flipped over. The contents were now exposed.

The skin and flesh of the fruit had been torn apart by the high voltage currents and now lined the inner edge of the bucket. Most of it was burnt black, but some still retained its original color. A marmalade-like smell reached Mikoto’s nose.

And something like black sesame seeds were scattered about. Gravity sent them pouring down into a small pile. Mikoto recognized them instantly. They were insects. The small six-legged insects had been turned to ash by the massive electric currents.

None of them were moving.

After confirming that, Mikoto manipulated magnetism to cover it all up with the tin bucket again.

She breathed a sigh of relief and sat weakly down on the parking lot ground.

An orange.

Crimson long-legged army ants.

The world’s largest shopping mall where anything could be bought.

A treasure trove of urban legends.

(So…it was true?)

The family of four was finally starting to make a fuss asking what she had done to their child, but Mikoto did not have the energy left to respond.

She ignored the cries in Russian and muttered in Japanese.

“…I guess I ended up making an unexpected demonstration a bit early.”

Part 7

Much time had passed since the sun had completely set.

It was well past the time for dinner or even a bath.

Mikoto had not returned to the hotel. She had been led to one section of the shopping mall. It was not a place where normal customers went. The area was for only staff and the special workers known as security guards. It had been described as the “backyard”, but it was essentially an interrogation room for the security guards.

The room had a simple table and chairs, a recording device, and a one-way mirror covering one of the walls. It was not a comfortable place in the slightest. Even in that room the walls, floor, and ceiling were devices for the Semipublic AR, so it felt a bit unbalanced.

“I see. So there were army ant eggs within the orange,” muttered a female security guard.

It seemed her name was Enirya G. Algonskaya. She was a red-headed woman in her late twenties. Her exacting behavior vaguely reminded Mikoto of a certain frightening dorm supervisor.

“I watched over the bucket until you got there and there was no sign of any having escaped. They were all killed. However, I have no way of knowing if few of them could have made their way out while the child was kicking the orange. Just in case, I think you should spray some insecticide around the area.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

“…But what is going on here? That incident was exactly like the urban legend. Whoever did it must be some crazy bastard.”

“As you can tell, we are in the middle of the investigation, so we cannot say anything yet,” Enirya said without smiling. “Of course, that is assuming that there were actually crimson long-legged army ants there.”

“…What?”

“The remains we have recovered have been completely turned to ash, so ‘we cannot say anything yet’. We cannot deny the possibility that some show-off was faking an incident that did not actually occur.”

“Are you serious?”

“It is merely one possibility. For us, that would be the best possibility, but we of course have to think about the less desirable possibilities.” Enirya shrugged. “We are currently investigating where the orange may have come from. However, there are over 80 places both large and small selling produce. This could take some time. And if the orange was brought in from outside, it could be even more difficult.”

“…”

“By the way…”

“What?”

“Did you know that the urban legend about the very valuable orange originated from a famous story about a cactus? A traveler in Central America buys a cactus and becomes suspicious when it starts twitching back at home, so he calls the florist or souvenir shop….and so forth. Also, the contents were not originally army ants.”

“??? What are you trying to say?”

“The version of the story where the cactus has turned into an orange is exceedingly rare. At the very least, it is not spreading throughout Russia. My conclusion is that the story of the very valuable orange is an exceedingly local urban legend that is only told within Japan’s Academy City.”

A searching gaze stared at her.

Mikoto frowned.

“Wait a second. You don’t mean…”

“And there just so happens to be someone from Academy City here for a demonstration right now. You do not have any guards or supervisors with you, correct?” Enirya spoke slowly. “We are a cooperative institution, but we are not knowledgeable in the local information of Academy City. I only know what I just told you because I requested some information from Academy City regarding this case. …So don’t you find it odd? This incident seems to have been based on that urban legend, so the one who caused it must have known the story of the very valuable orange. Am I wrong?”

“You’ve got to be kidding!! I only just learned of that rumor!!”

“Even if you have special powers, you are still essentially a normal middle school girl. The fact that you managed to ‘coincidentally’ resolve that incident seems suspicious to me.”

“It’s your negligence that allowed that orange to be there in the first place! Why am I being treated like a suspect just because I disposed of it!? Did I hurt your pride as a security guard or something!?”

“Oh, you need not get so worked up today.” Enirya spread out her arms to bring Mikoto back under control. “We shall continue this once your attorney has been called in. Although to be honest, I would rather get the truth out of you now.”

“…”

Enirya stood up from her seat and then left the interrogation room without turning back.

A heavy noise reverberated through the room as the door shut.

She had not promised to return Mikoto to the hotel. Would Mikoto end up staying there all night? Or would she be thrown into some kind of cell? Neither choice sounded like much fun.

Mikoto felt that things had gotten bad.

Mikoto leaned back in her cheap chair and thought while staring up at the ceiling.

Had it all just been a coincidence? Or had someone wanted to cause her demonstration to fail worsening the relationship between Academy City and its cooperative institutions? Or was there some conspiracy working to acquire Mikoto’s DNA map? She had no way of knowing. There just was not enough information.

However, she was not too worried.

After all, she had not been the criminal behind the orange incident. She had no reason to be panicked. Even the orange had been completely dealt with. There was little chance of the crimson long-legged army ants causing any real damage. As such, she just had to wait for the suspicions pointed in her direction to be cleared up. After all, Academy City let their valuable Level 5 outside the city with no guards or supervisors as a sign of their trust of the cooperative institutions. If that just ended up with her being locked up, Academy City would not stay quiet.

To pass the time, Mikoto started to pull out her cell phone. When she stuck her hand in her skirt pocket, she felt something squishy. It felt like oily skin.

(Uuh…!? What???)

Mikoto pulled her hand out in surprise and found a torn off piece of orange rind. She had used her foot when checking on the contents of the bucket, but that piece must have gotten stuck to her clothes at some point.

There were no ants left, but it was still creepy. If any small eggs were stuck on her clothes anywhere, it would be a major problem. Mikoto put the orange rind on top of the simple table. She started to move as far away from it as she could.

Suddenly, Mikoto froze.

Something like a small sticker was stuck on the surface of the rind. It reminded her of a QR code. It may take one to a web page displaying information on the product. Mikoto had heard of pages like that for produce that gave the expiration date as well as information on the area and farm it was produced in. Simply put, a small sticker could not hold all that information.

Mikoto’s eyes were fixed on the QR code.

If that orange was a product, would it really have been delivered all on its own? If it had been delivered, it would not have been packed all on its own in a box.

In other words, there was more than one orange.

It was possible there were more than ten similar items somewhere in the shopping mall.

It was possible there were more than ten oranges filled with crimson long-legged army ants.

“Wait…” Mikoto muttered.

She stood up from her seat in panic and headed for the door.

“Wait!! Listen to me!! The orange incident may not be over!! There may have been other similar oranges delivered with it!! If they had crimson long-legged army ants in them too, then this shopping mall could turn into a storm of ant colonies!!”

However, there was no response. She tried turning the knob, but it did not budge and there was no sign of anyone coming even after she pounded on the door for a bit.

Mikoto ran over to the one-way mirror covering one wall.

“I know you can hear me!! I’m not asking you to release me now!! Check on this QR code!! You may be able to find out where and when the oranges were delivered!!”

There was no response.

For an instant, Mikoto considered blowing the door down with a Railgun blast, but she decided that would not be her best option. If she broke her way out like that, a lot of people would attempt to stop her. She did not think it would be impossible for her to defeat all of them, but it would take too much time. She did not have the time needed to deal with a bunch of small fries.

(The QR code…)

Mikoto pointed her cell phone camera at it, but there was no response. It seemed to be a different format. She looked around. The walls and floor had Semipublic AR functionality.

The fact that she had not been cut off from the network may have been because they considered her questionable but still likely innocent. At any rate, Mikoto brought her hands to the wall. After performing a few operations, she pressed the orange rind with the sticker on it directly up against the wall.

It must have read it with ultrasonic waves because a few windows opened up.

“A box of 20 entered today through the east gate. If one of them fell out, then there are still 19 of them!!”

Those crimson long-legged army ants were in oranges not in insect cages. The ants had a tendency to put a large number of eggs in a fruit waiting for prey when the number of ants making up the colony fell too low, but someone had likely purposefully created that situation.

Why?

First of all, they could bring in the ants without raising suspicion.

Second of all, they could make them breed seemingly endlessly upon removing the queen’s limiter.

In other words, a breeder had created a living time bomb with the oranges.

Had one of the oranges fallen out while in preparation for some kind of plan? Or had a number of them already been set up and that incident had been the first one to activate?

In any case, one thing was for sure.

The incident would not end only on the scale of what had already happened.

The real thing was yet to come.

A very valuable orange.

Urban legends could no longer just be laughed off in that shopping mall.

"…"

The other oranges had likely not "detonated" yet. If they had, the security guards would have been more panicked.

The time when the eggs would hatch and the ants would become active could likely be regulated by the temperature and humidity, but it was still based on living creatures. The breeder may not have been able to perfectly control the timing of the hatching of the eggs.

When Mikoto had thought things through that far, she heard a commotion on the other side of the door. They must have been watching her through the one-way mirror. They must have been waiting to make their move. However, they did not seem intent on asking her questions throughout the night either. The security guards were not going to listen to her. They were not going to investigate the oranges. In that case, they were nothing more than an obstacle to Mikoto.

Mikoto could manipulate magnetism.

She rotated the bolts fixing the table to the floor at high speed. She pressed the table into the corner of the square room where the door was to prevent it from being opened.

Now the security guards could not enter the room.

However, that also meant Mikoto could not leave through the door…

"They never seem to realize…"

Mikoto headed for the small window in the interrogation room. The room was on the fifth floor. There was nothing in the room that could be used as a rope and what one could bring in was greatly restricted. As such, the security guards had let their guard down. There were no metal bars on the window.

Mikoto opened the window and leaned out.

“…that I can create as many footholds as I need using magnetism.”

She unhesitatingly jumped out.

As the bottom of her loafers scraped against the wall while she was in a pose like she was skiing, Mikoto thought.

Who in that city had she heard the story of the very valuable orange from?

Who had told her to watch out for oranges?

Where were the remaining living time bomb oranges set up?

She had a lot to investigate.

It seemed her demonstration truly was turning into something completely unexpected.

Notes

1. ↑ The urban legend being referenced is the "Daruma Woman". Simply put, it says a woman was kidnapped overseas and years later was found alive with her arms, legs, and tongue cut off in a shop in a foreign country that had "Daruma" in Japanese on its sign.

Chapter 2

Part 1

“So she got away…”

Enirya G. Algonskaya, a security guard, sighed while looking at the monitor.

She was in a small room.

It was the room beyond the interrogation room’s one-way mirror.

After cornering her a bit, they had given her a certain level of freedom. That was why they had allowed her to access the Semipublic AR and had not deleted her account. They had been hoping Mikoto would end up revealing something to them in how she used the network once she had lost her cool.

One of Enirya’s fellow security guards spoke while bringing up some files on the wall.

“She escaped through the window and along the wall. The AR monitors on the wall had some trouble due to magnetism. Perhaps we should not have treated her like a usual minor.”

“It’s not like we actually know how to restrain an esper. Not much data on them has been disclosed to us,” Enirya said in a very different tone from when she had spoken with Mikoto. “Or are you saying we should have put guillotine-like wooden shackles on her?”

“She rotated those bolts with magnetism. She might be able to vibrate something made of iron at high speed and use it like a saw.”

“So we have no way of resolving that. And now this dangerous person who can use anything made of steel like a saw or a bullet is fleeing through the city.” Enirya put her elbows up on the table and asked her fellow security guard a question with her head hanging down. “How is the tracking going? Do we have any idea where she’s fleeing to?”

“No. She is not showing up on the surveillance equipment.”

“Hm, and it isn’t supposed to have any blind spots. …What about her Semipublic AR account? Has she used it?”

That city’s AR checked on the user’s location and made sure others could not see the images the user was seeing. That also meant that the person’s location could be checked on.

However…

“She has not used it at all since she escaped. We are continuing to monitor her account, but…”

“So she’s realized what we can do with it.” Enirya smiled a bit despite having lost a possible hint. “We can target that.”

“?”

“Everyone in this city uses the Semipublic AR. It is not forced on them, but it is simply inconvenient not to. …A lone person not using it will stand out. Search for someone who is slow to react. Don’t just use the surveillance equipment. Have the security guards on patrol be on the lookout, too. Anyone can see the importance of human eye surveillance with things like checks for suspicious objects in airports.”

While looking over at her fellow security guard using the AR to arrange that, Enirya added more in her thoughts.

(What was that esper yelling in the interrogation room?)

She frowned while performing some operations on a monitor that had been isolated from the AR.

(She said this was not over and that there were 19 oranges left.)

She typed on the table performing a search over the AR.

(The details are unknown on the contents of the bucket the suspect said she stopped. The contents were almost completely turned to ash making it hard to tell if they were actually crimson long-legged army ants.)

If they had the lab check the DNA, some new information might be found, but that would simply take too long.

Of course, she could not deny the possibility that the remains did not belong to crimson long-legged army ants. It could all be the prank of a middle school girl.

However…

(If so, would she have had a good enough reason to escape the interrogation room? She caused some trouble, but if she had only used normal harmless ants, it was at a level where she could have just apologized.)

That meant the situation may have gotten to a point where that would not cut it.

(But now that she's run off, it seems the best option where it was just a prank has disappeared. The incident was real. However, what exactly is going on? Were there really crimson long-legged army ants there or was she merely claiming there were and now she's about to cause some more trouble?)

After thinking for a bit, Enirya tapped her index finger on the table getting rid of the AR search.

(In any case, we will capture her.)

She once more confirmed what her own objective was.

(Getting information from the one who knows what is going on is the fastest method.)

Part 2

The date had changed.

Misaka Mikoto ran through the shopping mall late at night.

There was a major difference between day and night. Things were completely sectioned off. The night leisure areas that functioned into the night continually emitted light while the areas that closed at sundown were wrapped in darkness.

The vacant darkness may have been reminiscent of a school at night.

The emergency paths, the paths leading to security guard stations, and the locations of fire extinguishers and AEDs were color coded on the floor with arrows. The blue dots at even intervals on the ceiling likely denoted the locations of the sprinklers.

Those things were being shown on the Semipublic AR.

Because Mikoto was not allowing their sensors to see her, they were not able to personally focus them for her. Most likely, those displays were set at an isolation level where everyone could see them. In other words, it was the same as a normal television.

As Mikoto hid behind a display shelf with household appliances lined up on it, a few footsteps passed by.

It seemed to be a group of three. They seemed to be using the Semipublic AR to follow the “footprints” left on the floor.

If Mikoto had not tampered with the sensors, they would have caught up to her very quickly.

(But that also means I can throw them off my trail as often as I want as long as I can interfere with their electronic equipment.)

She watched the security guards head off in the wrong direction following dummy “footprints”. However, they would likely realize the “footprints” were unnatural before long. Once they stopped relying on the sensors, things would truly begin.

She could not allow herself to be captured.

Oranges filled with crimson long-legged army ant eggs could be set up around the shopping mall to act as living time bombs at that very moment. She had no idea when the eggs would hatch and the ants would become active. She had no idea how tenacious the ants were, but they might attack people no matter where they hid once they were spread around. It was horrible to imagine.

“…”

There were a lot of things she needed to investigate.

She had heard oranges mentioned a few times since she had entered the city. She had to go back and investigate those instances.

(It would be so easy if I could use the AR.)

Mikoto looked down at the ground while still hiding behind the display.

She was an esper that could control electricity. That did not just mean she could create powerful high voltage currents. She could also carry out precise hacking. In a city that managed the flow of people and things at such a high level, she could easily search for someone using the surveillance cameras, the electronic money, and other things. For Mikoto, an analog rural city would be harder to work in.

But the systems in that city used the Semipublic AR. That interface required Mikoto to use the actions of her body. In other words, if she used the ultrasonic wave sensors like usual, the security guards would find her.

She needed a different account to use.

She was already using her hacking to fool the cameras and sensors, but another problem arose. Just by going about not using the Semipublic AR that everyone used, she stood out to the security guards watching.

To completely continue on, she needed a new account.

However, the security was strong enough that Mikoto could not create a new account even with her hacking.

To create a new account, it seemed she needed to physically contact a large server that managed a great amount of information.

(I'll start my preparations there for safety and convenience's sake.)

Mikoto could not use the Semipublic AR, so she forced herself to recall the signs she had seen before.

She looked all around her and stopped while staring in a direction from which a faint light was leaking.

Part 3

There were many different types of night leisure activities.

That area was like an amusement park lit up with many lights giving it a different look from a daytime amusement park. There were clubs for youths filled with booming music and alcohol. There was an opera house that required formal wear and an otherwise nice appearance to get in. There were various amusements of every genre, for every rank, and for every target demographic. All of it filled that area of the dark night with light.

However, the areas that would fulfill Mikoto's requirements were limited.

She needed a place with a large server that dealt with a large amount of data.

"The casino, hm?"

(…I'm more used to arcades.)

As Mikoto muttered both out loud and silently, she was not wearing her Tokiwadai uniform. Instead, she was wearing a mostly red dress. She had taken it from the back of a dress shop she had found along the way. It was labeled "Misaka Mikoto—Demonstration Outfit", so she did not think it would be a problem.

Mikoto was fired up, but when she actually entered the casino, it turned out not to have as formal and dignified an atmosphere as she had thought. There were a lot of gentlemen and ladies in formal dress at the roulette and baccarat tables that had dealers, but the area full of slot machines had plenty of Asians in T-shirts and jeans. That area looked just like the slot machines in a pachinko parlor.

Mikoto had no idea what the laws were in Russia, but in the shopping mall, both adults and children were allowed in the casino hall. Most of the children were with their parents, but that was not because they were required to be accompanied by an adult. It was simply due to the fact that most of the kids in the shopping mall were there on a trip with their families.

As such, a middle school girl like Misaka Mikoto did not especially stand out upon marching into the casino.

In fact, she seemed right at home.

(Is that really something to be proud of?)

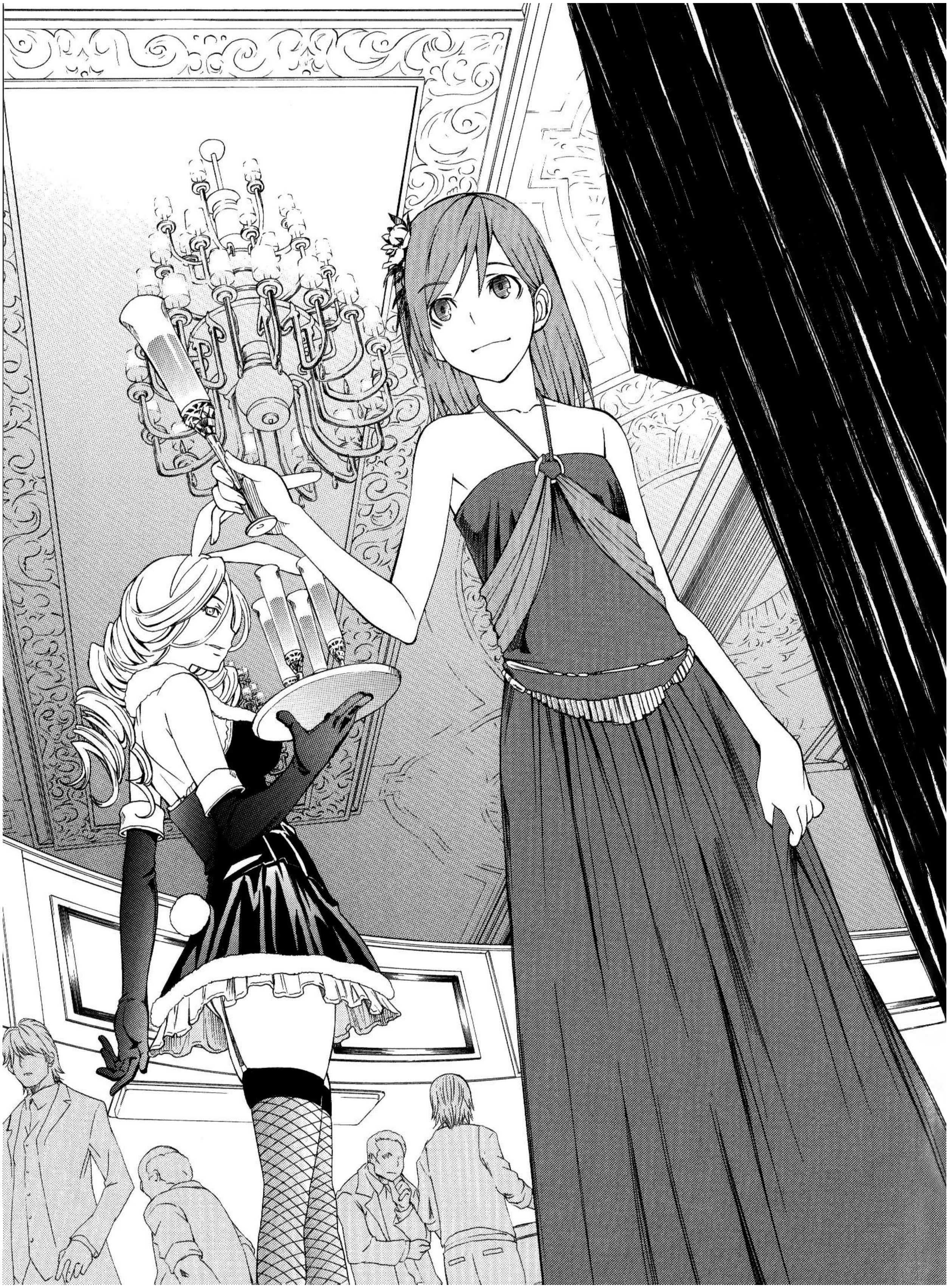
There were plenty of human eyes she could not fool with her power like she could with the cameras and sensors. However, no one pointed her out as a wanted criminal and the security guards did not come charging over.

Perhaps her atmosphere had changed due to the dress, perhaps the security guards had hidden the information on her from the general public, or perhaps the people were simply too used to the Semipublic AR so they were unable to focus on her as long as a “danger” icon did not appear above her head.

If she did not take action while she could, she would be cornered before long.

(Now then…)

Mikoto looked around.



(There are all sorts of chips clattering around either increasing or decreasing in amount. This can't just be the money they have on hand. There must be a system for using your credit card data to buy chips. There has to be a large server here that is linked to credit card companies across the world.)

However, the interior of the casino was made to look like an aristocratic mansion, so the ugly boxes like an air conditioner were not just left out in the open. They were likely stored somewhere possibly underground or in an adjacent room.

The walls, pillars, floor, tables, show windows, and everything else in that place were a terminal for the Semipublic AR, but those were just the very ends of the system. Those were far from the computers that managed all the accounts. Simply put, there were a lot of defensive walls between those two parts of the system and the data that could get through was limited.

However, if she made the commands directly in a large server, she could force her way through all the defensive walls at once.

Mikoto lightly looked around as she took a mixed drink known as a non-alcoholic cocktail from an unknown bunny girl.

There were stairs at the end of the hall that seemed to lead to the VIP seats on the second floor.

In other words, the area below that was a giant box.

“So it's there.”

Mikoto lightly brought the cocktail glass to her lips and walked closer to the VIP seats while making sure not to go against the flow of people and the music being played within the casino.

There was a poker table below the VIP seats.

The cards were dealt by a physical dealer, but the betting and dividing up of chips seemed to be done digitally by the Semipublic AR on the table.

The dealer had his back to the wall, so it would be difficult to get up next to the wall.

You were free to watch the players, but hanging out in the back too much would probably make people suspect you were trying to spy on the cards and let one of the players know.

The best way to stay by the wall for a long period was…

(Sigh… I guess I have no choice but to join in.)

But while that game of poker used paper cards and a dealer (perhaps to ensure fairness), it also used the Semipublic AR for the betting and dividing up of the chips.

Mikoto could not use her own account, so was it even possible for her to join in?

“Hee hee hee. You seem troubled.”

“Wah!?”

Mikoto’s shoulders jumped in surprise at the sudden voice from behind.

Standing there was the girl named Lessar from the occult convenience store. For some reason, she was dressed as a black bunny girl and was piling variously colored chips onto a silver tray.

“I’m not sure what it is that has you so troubled, though. Did your allowance run out?”

“Wait a second. You said something about an orange to me, right? I need you to tell me what you were—”

As Mikoto tried to speak, Lessar stretched out her index finger.

She touched Mikoto’s lower lip with that finger.

“Non non. Should you be talking about that here?”

“(…I need to speak with you later.)”

Mikoto had no idea who this Lessar girl really was. She had given her a hint about the orange. Due to that, she had somehow managed to deal with the first orange explosion, but she still did not know if Lessar was good or bad. However, it was clear that she had something to do with the incident.

But Mikoto still had no allies she could be completely sure of.

She did not need to wish for that much.

(I suppose I have to use everything I can…)

Mikoto reconfirmed her plan.

(As such, I still need to work on getting a new account allowing me to freely walk through the facility like I originally planned.)

“Are you working now? Or are you dressed like that for fun?”

“Nihon Daruma is a shop for souvenirs that bring good luck and certain victory, so its true value can be seen in a place like this. Even those who would normally find it ridiculous come to buy things. Although I don’t think there is actually anyone who can use spells that twist probability theory or statistics. To answer your question, I do not work for the casino, so I am not prohibited from gambling on the job.”

“And you can use the Semipublic AR, right?”

“What about it?”

In response to Lessar’s question, Mikoto pointed toward the poker table.

“I’ll help you win some easy money, so help me out.”

Part 4

It was not even a competition.

Lessar in her black bunny girl outfit sat down at the Japanese fan-shaped table and Mikoto remained on standby peering over Lessar's shoulder at the cards.

Then Mikoto just had to give slight instructions on what to do based on the five cards dealt to Lessar.

By the way, no matter how much tremendous luck one had, not even an experienced professional player could win every single time. What was important in that kind of card game was to clearly have hands one won and hands one lost during the first stage. One pushed toward losing on the hands that would have the lowest damage and pushed toward winning on the hands that would bring the greatest benefit. The differences between those would bring the player victory in the end.

"Wow, you're really making this look easy. It feels like I was given a bank account that never goes down no matter how much I use it."

"Luck and skill are not needed. Anyone can win as long as they can do math."

"But poker is more than just probability and statistics, right? In fact, I think the real thrill comes from the psychological warfare."

"Economics is fundamentally the study of the movements of people's hearts. If unease spreads through the market, stock prices can plummet for no reason. Deciding when to stay with it and when to back out is the same," Mikoto replied arbitrarily, but her true goal was not victory in a card game.

That was just what she was doing in her spare time.

Her brain was mainly focused on manipulating minute electronic currents in order to hack the large server.

“But is this really okay?”

“Is what?”

“No matter how many hands go by and no matter how mean the dealer gets, we do not lose any chips. The other players are getting mad, the dealer is getting panicked, and it feels like someone is going to call the security guards on us for cheating before long.”

“Hm, I guess we stood out too much. …Wait, did you know I was being chased?”

“More or less.”

“What do you think I’m doing right now?”

“Trying to get some money to use in your flight?”

“Don’t joke. Running away isn’t my thing.”

A commotion had started behind Mikoto. Like a wave, it slowly approached her. It seemed more like someone was cutting through the waves of people than like the clamoring people were approaching.

“Looks like the time has come.”

“What should we do? If you’re going to run, I suggest creating some legal disorder. For instance, you could slam your fist down on the pile of chips to send them flying everywhere.”

(Whether I create some disorder or not, running out in a hurry is not a good plan. It would simply stand out too much.)

Mikoto felt a numb feeling on the inside of her forehead.

She continued to interfere with the large server.

The commotion continued to approach as she did so.

The people cutting through the waves of people were likely security guards.

“(They’re gonna ask for your digital identification, so it’ll look suspicious if you can’t use the Semipublic AR. However, you can’t exactly show them your actual ID either.)”

“(…Shut up. Just stay quiet.)”

Lessar did not seem worried at all. In fact, she looked at Mikoto and the security guard with a mischievous look in her eyes.

The security guards were now directly behind Mikoto.

Mikoto’s bangs slightly wavered in an unnatural way.

They did not hesitate.

Mikoto felt a hand on her right shoulder.

For some reason, she responded by turning around to the left.

She could not display a digital ID or show her normal ID as Misaka Mikoto…or so it should have been.

“Do you need something?” Mikoto said with a smile.

At the same time, a large window displaying a digital ID appeared on the floor. She used the keyboard in the touch window on the poker table to set the Semipublic AR to a level where the security guards could see it.

Two male security guards had come.

They looked down at the ground dubiously.

One of them spoke while looking at the data giving the personal information of the girl before his eyes.

“…Benisaki Eri-san?”

Lessar was the only one that smiled at that.

The girl in the red dress put her expression in order and slowly asked a question.

“Yes, is there a problem?”

She blinked her eyes in a way that a fellow woman could tell was completely purposeful.

“What were you two called here for?”

The security guards turned their suspicious gazes from the girl in the red dress to the dealer. He had likely been the one who had reported the girls for making people less likely to play at his table due to their constant winning.

“The movements of the cards should be tracked by the table’s Semipublic AR and you can also check the camera at the edge of ceiling over there.”

The girl in the red dress put a hand on Lessar’s shoulder in order to urge her to stand up.

The security guard men became a bit flustered.

“Eh…ah…wait! Where do you think you’re g—”

“Then I’ll leave these.”

Mikoto dropped all the chips they had gained on the table.

She then pointed toward the dealer.

“However, you are the one who will lose in the end. We didn’t do anything wrong and yet you conspired with the security guards to have our game forfeited just because you weren’t doing so well. If I am restrained even temporarily, the opinion of this casino will drop like a rock. No one wants to be arrested for a baseless crime.”

After saying that, the girl in the red dress left the table along with Lessar. She moved powerfully and quickly but not so quickly that it seemed unnatural.

“(…Now then, I wonder if this will allow you to get away.)”

“(Don’t worry. The dealer who started this will do everything he can to end it because his job is on the line.)”

“(I don’t know how you got it, but isn’t that account you worked so hard to get useless now that it has been checked on?)”

“(I created more than one account just now.)”

The girl in the red dress leisurely headed for the casino’s exit as she listened to the trouble still occurring behind her.

“What are you going to do now?” asked bunny girl Lessar.

“We need to go somewhere where we can talk. I want to ask you something about the oranges.”

“Hm,” Lessar responded arbitrarily. “Then let’s head for Nihon Daruma.”

“W-wait. That’s fine, but what route are you taking?”

“We’ll stand out if we’re together, so let’s split up and rendezvous back there.”

“Hey! You need to answer my ques—!!”

Leaving the door to the casino open, Lessar quickly mixed in with the crowds outside.

Yelling out after the other girl could bring the focus of the security guards back on her, so the girl in the red dress sighed and started calmly travelling along with the flow of the people.

Part 5

Changing somewhere other than a dressing room took courage, but Mikoto managed to change out of the red dress and into her uniform.

She then headed to the occult convenience store.

Souvenir shops at tourist spots tended to close the earliest of any kind of store in the world, but that place did call itself a convenience store. Even after the date had changed, it was still filled with white-ish fluorescent light.

The girl named Lessar who had been working there had told Mikoto to watch out for oranges.

She had to know something.

On top of that, the occult convenience store was filled with suspicious looking goods. It was possible they treated horrible ants as pets.

Mikoto was planning to meet up with Lessar in order to get what information she could from the girl and then borrow a staff room at the occult convenience store or some other place that had a bit of privacy where she could use the Semipublic AR to search for some information on the living bombs.

However…

“Wait, where’s Lessar?” Mikoto asked as soon as the door slid open and she got a look inside the store.

The girl who had been working there just a few hours before was nowhere to be seen. A different girl had brought a folding chair behind the register counter and was flipping through a few Japanese sports newspapers.

“Hm?”

The girl was shorter than Mikoto. She had short brown hair that was forced up with a headband. Her nametag said “Lancis”. She was white just like Lessar.

She spoke after shuddering for some reason.

“…Lessar has not come back yet…”

“That brat. And she’s the one that said to meet up here,” Mikoto said accidentally letting her resentment leak into her voice.

The girl who seemed to be named Lancis looked at Mikoto’s chest with a confused look.

“…Lessar seems like more of an adult than you, though.”

“Where are you looking and what is your basis for that judgment, you damn brat!! I can’t lose to a child like that!!”

“Nnn, despite how she looks, Lessar broke the record at her school by starting to wear a bra in fourth grade.”

“Uuh!?”

Mikoto faltered. It was a secret that she did not start doing so until halfway through her first year of middle school.

“A-anyway, it seems Lessar isn’t here, so I can’t ask her about the orange. Have you heard when she’s going to be back?”

“I have this.”

Lancis waved around something in her hand. Mikoto grabbed it doubtfully. It seemed to be a postcard. The entire backside had some kind of painting printed on it. It may have been a religious picture. The picture was in truly bad taste as it showed a lady being captured by incredibly large ants.

“…Wait a second. If Lessar hasn’t come back yet, where did this postcard come from?”

“They can be delivered very quickly within the shopping mall. Although it’s still not as fast as just sending an email.”

Mikoto flipped it over to look at the front. The top half had the destination address and the bottom half had the message. The area for the sender’s location was left completely blank, but the message section had round English letters written in black marker.

It said: *There is an incident carried out that follows a rumor, but what if the rumor itself was intentionally spread for that reason?*

“…”

Mikoto looked up from the postcard.

“I don’t have time for riddles.”

“Don’t look at me,” replied Lancis without much energy before collapsing over the newspapers and the counter.

It seemed the late night shift had made her rather tired.

“…We cannot predict what Lessar will do. And Bayloupe got after her about it recently, too…”

Mikoto even heard a snore. It seemed the girl had just fallen asleep.

For an instant, Mikoto thought of smacking the girl to wake her up and get Lessar’s cell phone number, but she decided that wasn’t the best idea. If Lessar was seriously intending to flee, she would not stay on the phone long enough to allow Mikoto to trace her using it.

(Anyway, it seems she didn’t immediately report me. I wonder how far the fact that I was involved with that orange incident and am fleeing from the security guards has spread.)

That kind of convenience store could have an alarm button under the register counter, so she could not let her guard down, but she wouldn’t worry too much until security guards actually showed up.

She had something she needed to investigate.

Mikoto put her hands on top of the register counter and called up a keyboard to control the Semipublic AR. Of course, she was using one of the accounts she had acquired in the casino. Her fingers raced across the surface as she began her search for the information she needed.

What she needed was…

(The security camera records for the entrance near the east gate.)

That orange had just been lying on the ground at that entrance with people streaming in both directions. If she checked on the footage from around that time, she might be able to find who put the orange there and where they went afterwards.

Of course, that information was not open to the public.

Mikoto put together her knowledge and ability to search for data she would normally not be able to access.

She almost immediately made it to the entire library of security camera footage.

However…

“The data is corrupted and cannot be read.”

That simple message popped up. Mikoto tried to open a different file. There was more than one camera set in each place. Because things were being monitored from multiple different points, there were multiple files that could be used.

And yet…

“The data is corrupted and cannot be read.”

“The data is corrupted and cannot be read.”

“The data is corrupted and cannot be read.”

Consistently receiving that same message surprised Mikoto more than it annoyed her. Someone had deleted the data for only that specific time.

Someone who worked at the shopping mall would be the most suspicious, but a third party could still have done it as shown by the fact that Mikoto had been able to hack in that far. It was difficult to narrow down who had messed with the security camera data with that situation alone.

She could not track where the oranges could have gone using those recordings.

Even then, the countdown continued until the eggs would hatch causing the living bomb to go off.

(That means I have no choice but to chase after the oranges using only the flow of the people.)

Mikoto looked back down at the postcard.

The riddle-like text seemed to be a hint related to the incident, but Mikoto could not get anything concrete out of it.

The picture of the ants and the lady reminded Mikoto of the crimson long-legged army ants, but it still did not seem to have any real information in it.

But…

“This pattern…?”

Mikoto focused on the lady’s clothes. They had a white and black design on them, but the balance seemed to be off at the edges as if it had turned into a monotone mosaic.

Her eyes were drawn in toward one point.

It looked familiar.

It was a square with a random arrangement of black and white.

(A QR code…?)

Mikoto pulled out her cell phone and aimed the camera lens at it, but it failed to read it. Mikoto almost gave up thinking she had read too much into it, but she suddenly looked over at the wall of the occult convenience store.

She recalled that the QR code used for the information on that orange had been in a format that needed to be read ultrasonically using the Semipublic AR.

She approached the wall.

Just like before, she pressed the postcard against the wall.

A rectangular window opened up like a large poster. It seemed to be different from a normal webpage. It was the type of page that could not be accessed via a search engine and could only be accessed directly through its IP address.

However, there was no information there.

It only had text in the center telling her to enter a password.

(Should I break through using brute force?)

Mikoto thought of using her power on it, but she then spotted a small signature at the edge of the backside of the postcard. However, the arrangement of the letters of the alphabet was too random to be a penname.

Mikoto entered those letters into the wall as the password.

She made it through on the first try.

After that confirmation, a great amount of information was displayed in the large poster.

What it said was…

Part 6

Project Code EIC.

Concerning the encouragement of group psychology on the premise of economic effects.

The project will use this shopping mall as a testing ground to control the information about products on every level from the advertisements using the mass media to even the exchange of information between users over the internet and word of mouth. The intent will be to provide the most suitable stimulus to the customers on a mental level.

Due to the nature of the project, we cannot create a nonexistent product from nothing.

All this project specializes in is taking an already existing product and adding to its intrinsic value.

Products that have had their intrinsic value increased will become scarce because the rate at which they are consumed will increase. At the same time, the rate of consumption for products that have their value lowered will drop.

It may be simpler to think of it as giving products a sense of being “premiere” or making people see them as branded in a certain way.

We will call bringing a product’s sales up a “positive change” and the opposite a “negative change”.

By using these positive and negative changes, the rates of consumption for various products can be regulated. This can be used to create a large “flow” in the market and even to control entire economies. That is the true meaning of this project.

Whether we are making a positive or negative change, we add in all sorts of information based on an already existing product and make suggestions that compel people in one way or the other but leaves them with a certain degree of freedom.

They will make a personal judgment on the value of the product as it is and a prediction of the value of the product in the future. Based on that information, they will decide whether to purchase it or not.

When rain is scarce and water is expected dry up, people try to stockpile water and when there is too much rain and it is expected to have a negative effect on crops, people try to stockpile vegetables.

When a warm winter is expected, people will wait to buy studless tires; and when a cool spring is expected to severely lowers the amount of pollen, the amount of masks bought lowers.

And all of this happens even when the data saying these things are expected is based on nothing.

It is common for people to intuitively determine how credible they find the data they use to decide whether to purchase a product or not. Often times, information of every level from a news broadcast put out by a specialty agency that verifies everything down to even a widespread rumor are taken in without distinguishing between the two sources.

We will create positive and negative changes for specific products in that form of what is “popular”.

We will control the consumers’ mentality with information.

They will receive this information from multiple sources, but it is not important what forms of media are used.

People are weak to multiple media.

If one medium gives a product high praise and another medium says otherwise, people will end up deciding to think for themselves.

On the other hand, if something people have heard rumors of locally is picked up by television stations and other mass media, they will feel trust and assurance from that.

We can use the thought patterns the customers themselves have built up on how to make judgments on the information they hear by giving out information in stages from multiple media sources in order to give the sense of what is “popular” that we wish. In doing so, we can raise or lower what products sell and what stores customers go to.

If you think of it like a pyramid, our final objective is to push from the base in order to shake the peak with finely-tuned vibrations.

The experiment in this shopping mall will use rumors as the form of information.

We will see how far the experimental information we have created spreads and in what time frame. We will also see how long until it ends and how much the information becomes distorted in the process of spreading.

We will see what general percentages of different age groups actually take action based on the information we spread.

Multiple routes through which to transmit this experimental information have been prepared and the first experiment’s goal is to find the most suitable route for…

Part 7

Mikoto fell silent as she looked at the poster-sized window.

Project Code EIC.

A system to manipulate business results by spreading false rumors that altered the value of various products.

A third party would put a different value on the standard products that one would normally be able to just reach out and grab. That concept gave Mikoto a similar impression to the one she had of the Semipublic AR that had utterly permeated that city.

“…”

What if that report was telling the truth and a special advertisement system to control sales had indeed been implemented in that city?

Even if that Code EIC had been created solely out of good intentions, it did not matter. The effects it could have were massive.

Code EIC did not have the ability to control people’s minds and forcibly order them to do things.

It could only manipulate how people viewed various products and determine what was popular by creating rumors about them.

However, that was enough.

Whoever was controlling Code EIC could spread any rumor they wanted no matter how absurd it was at any time.

For instance, they could spread a rumor about an orange with a large amount of army ant eggs implanted in it.

In that case, most of the strange aspects regarding the very valuable orange urban legend disappeared. The fact that an identical urban legend had spread through Academy City at the same time was because someone had purposefully spread the rumor with that timing.

And if those who were setting up the oranges could pull the trigger on the incident whenever they wanted, it was all quite simple.

But…

(Why are they setting up the oranges in the first place? I can’t figure that out. Even if I know how the rumor is being spread, I can’t do anything if I don’t know why they are trying to cause incidents related to that rumor.)

She did not know who, but the person controlling the rumor had to be someone closely related to the shopping mall. But then what did they gain by spreading large amounts of army ants throughout their own home ground of the shopping mall?

“Hmm?” Lancis, who had been sleeping sprawled out on the register counter, looked up while rubbing her eyes. “…Are you still here? Don’t tell me you’re actually planning to buy something.”

“That’s about the worst possible thing for someone in customer service to say.”

Mikoto looked around.

If she used the Semipublic AR, she could figure out where most people lived. However, she was looking for the person completely controlling the popularity of things, the rumors, and the urban legends in that city using group psychology. She doubted whoever it was would simply tell her about their plan. However, she also needed to figure out where the other living bombs were set up around the city.

“You have all kinds of questionable things here, right?”

“…I’m not sure what you’re expecting, but we can even get you things like human skulls.”

“I see,” said Mikoto deciding to take that as a joke. “Then would you happen to have any oranges?”

As she asked her question, Mikoto manipulated the Semipublic AR on the floor, hacked through the security, and fairly accurately calculated out where a certain person must live given security camera records and the deposits of electronic money.

The person was Setali S. Skinikia.

She had been Mikoto’s guide to the city and had been the one to tell her the story of the very valuable orange.

And that had also been the name listed as the author at the end of the project report.

Part 8

Setali headed underground in an elevator and then walked quickly down a long passageway.

She was not heading for a secret base or anything like that.

The giant shopping mall built on the plains of Russia was basically a flat facility spreading out horizontally. However, that did not give enough living space for the over 50,000 workers. That space had been developed underground. Setali was returning to her apartment.

Things had developed in an unexpected way.

It seemed that Misaka Mikoto girl had escaped from a security guard office and was even then wandering about the shopping mall.

It was best to escape.

In a way, Setali was Misaka Mikoto’s sole point of contact within the shopping mall.

The odds were not exactly low that the girl would come her way if she were wrapped up in some kind of trouble.

She did not need to be told by her fellow security guards that being found by that girl would be bad.

But the public transportation facilities were closed at that time and even if she tried to use a car, it would just make it more likely she would be noticed. Setali was going to gather up some things in her apartment and then head for a tourist hotel. The large number of hotels in the city could hold up to 200,000 people. If she used a fake name and mixed in with all those people, she would not be found.

She would gather together the bare minimum of necessities in her apartment and quickly head to the hotel.

Once dawn came and the public transportation facilities began moving again, she would get on a passenger plane and leave the city.

That would be the end of it.

The girl would no longer be able to track her and Setali would have successfully escaped to safety. In that time, the security guards could act and finish things. Misaka Mikoto's escape scene would not last long. She would eventually be tracked down and captured.

Everything was going well.

In fact, Setali could see no factor that would fail.

However, the instant she opened her front door, a white hand reached out through the gap and pulled her inside the room. She was pulled into that room which should have been locked until Setali had unlocked it just then.

Her back was slammed up against the wall.

She thought her breathing was going to stop, but that was not just because of the impact.

"People never seem to realize…"

Grabbing Setali's collar and whispering to her at close range was a Japanese middle school girl.

"…that I can freely move the pins in a keyhole using magnetism. If you would at least make them of brass or stainless steel, you wouldn't be faced with this kind of problem."

"Misaka Mikoto…!?"

"Since you're so surprised to see me, I'm guessing you have an idea what I'm here for."

With her back pressed up against the wall, Setali tried to shake off Mikoto's arms, but Mikoto was faster. She lightly swept Setali's legs out from under her causing her to collapse to the floor.

She had held back, but that was hard to tell from Setali's point of view.

That time, the woman's breathing really did stop for a few seconds.

"I know that some oranges were delivered through the east gate at about 17:00 yesterday," Mikoto said in a low voice ignoring the woman's coughing.

She threw her next questions at Setali violently.

"Twenty oranges were delivered together!! Only one of those has been recovered! Where are the remaining 19!? Have crimson long-legged army ant eggs been implanted into all of them!?"

"I-I don't know."

"Once those 'detonate', a huge number of ants will be scattered everywhere! They will eat up all human and animal flesh as they continue to breed and breed!! Once that happens, it's too late! And with these crimson long-legged army ant living bombs, the colony is purposefully put in danger so the limit on the number of queens will likely be gone. Once the ants inside become active, they may breed so explosively that they will swallow up this entire city!!"

Setali shook her head back and forth as she was being pressed to the ground.

"I don't know anything about these oranges!!"

There was a dull noise.

It was the sound of thrusting her knees onto the floor right next to Setali's sides.

"I was suspected because the same rumor was spreading in Academy City and this shopping mall at the exact same time. The rumor was that of the very valuable orange. They claimed that I had to have purposefully spread the rumor and created an incident identical to it because I'm the only person who has gone between both cities."

A high voltage current was coming dangerously close to shooting from Mikoto's fingertips, but she desperately restrained herself.

"But there's someone else who it could have been. After all, I had not heard the story of the very valuable orange until yesterday when I came to this city. That was when I first heard it from someone named Setali S. Skinikia."

"…!?"

"Answer me. Why did you know the story of the very valuable orange that had only been spread within Academy City at that point? And how much did you have to do with the living orange bomb incident taking place in this shopping mall?"

"I really don't know anything…"

Tears started spilling from Setali's eyes.

Mikoto did not know if they were due to fear or if they were an attempt at deception.

"I first saw that urban legend a few days before on the internet. I was looking up local information on Academy City so I would have things to talk with you about. I don't know why things turned out this way. What are these oranges you're talking about? What do you mean by a living bomb?"

"…"

While still sitting atop Setali, Mikoto stared into her eyes.

With her face wrinkled up in tears, Setali shook her head.

"Even if some incident has occurred following that urban legend…"

Mikoto listened to Setali's words trying to determine whether they were the truth or a lie.

The woman continued speaking in a voice mixed with tears and sobs.

"…what are you saying I did? If the spread of a rumor is deeply related to this incident, then the criminal would have to be able to control the very flow of that rumor. Do you really think I could do something like that? It’s true that I could spread a rumor, but only a small handful of people would be able to ensure that it spread and became a major story that anyone would have heard of. Even a professional in the television business has to rely on luck for that kind of thing.”

“Yes,” Mikoto muttered.

She had come to her conclusion.

No matter how many tears flowed from Setali’s eyes, no matter how much her face wrinkled up in fear, and no matter how much she desperately insisted that she had only been wrapped up in it all, she was lying.

Even if Mikoto wanted to avert her gaze, she had to continue.

“Project Code EIC.”

“….!?”

That time, Setali S Skinikia’s entire body convulsed as if an electric current had passed through it.

“That project purposefully controls rumors in order to add or remove value to chosen products and to completely control which stores succeed. This city already had a system in place to control rumors and urban legends. You had to have known about it. After all, your name was given as the author of the report.”

“That’s…!?”

Mikoto did not wait for a response.

No, she could not wait for a response.

The next thing she knew, bluish-white sparks were flying from her fingertips. The current was at around 500,000 volts. That level of high voltage current was in bad taste even for a self defense stun gun.

A zapping noise exploded out.

Mikoto was ensuring that it did not head in Setali’s direction as she held the woman’s collar, but the woman did not know that. She was feeling only pure fear.

“Gy-gy-gy-gyaaaahhh!?”

It was perhaps commendable that Setali did not avert the focus of her gaze.

But Mikoto ignored that.

“I don’t know why you spread those oranges around and I do not intend to ask.” Mikoto would no longer be fooled by tears. “Where are the living bombs!? Where are the remaining 19 oranges!? That’s all you need to tell me. I won’t call the security guards on you, so just answer me!!”

“I…don’t know…” Even then, that was all Setali said. “I really don’t know anything about that urban legend becoming an actual incident.”

“I see.”

Mikoto sighed.

She was conflicted about what she should do.

(Is there…)

Should she pass beyond a certain line and use her powers violently?

(Is there some other way…?)

Mikoto poured strength into her hands and dragged Setali up from the floor.

“Then I’ll check to see whether what you’re saying is true or not.”

She headed further into the apartment dragging Setali along with her. She found the bathroom, opened the door, and threw Setali inside.

“What are you—?”

Setali’s words trailed off and her face stiffened.

Misaka Mikoto pulled a single large orange from her skirt's pocket. It was an odd orange that seemed almost squishy because it was overripe.

Setali did not even have time to yell or stand up from the tiled floor.

Mikoto chucked the orange into the bathroom and mercilessly closed the door. She then dragged the washing machine over and pushed it up against the bathroom door.

Inside the small bathroom, Setali pressed her back up against the wall to get as far away from the orange as she could. She slowly approached the door, but it would not open. She pounded on the door with her fists and slammed into it with her shoulder, but it would not budge.

"Wait!! Wait!! What is this!?"

"…Oh? I see no reason for you to panic. If you truly think what I'm saying is a bunch of crap and you truly know nothing about the oranges, then you wouldn't know how dangerous that orange is."

"You have to be kidding… You have to be kidding!! You just told me!! You mentioned oranges with eggs implanted inside them!! You said the ants inside would become active!! If that's true…!!"

"You don't need to worry."

Mikoto's voice was kind.

For an instant, Setali's heart tried to find escape in the idea that the orange was a harmless bluff, but…

"It's true that there are larva inside that squishy orange and about half of them have grown to adulthood already, but the bathroom is a sealed area. Even if it does 'explode', the ants cannot escape so easily. …The ventilation ducts and drains are a bit worrying, but when you know what the dangers are at the beginning, you can set up traps. By sending a high voltage current through those areas, the ants that enter will be fried."

"N-no, no!! What are you thinking!? This is not normal!! Do you know what kind of ants crimson long-legged army ants are!?"

“Not really, but that is a creepy name, isn’t it? I wonder if they could eat a cow or a pig down to its bones.”

“…!!”

Setali pounded her fists on the door. Her breathing was erratic. Red blood was leaking from her hands. But it was no good. The door would not open even a single millimeter. She was completely trapped.

“You probably shouldn’t get too worked up.”

Mikoto’s voice from the other side of the door was one of someone enjoying herself.

That irritated Setali’s nerves even further.

“My prediction is that the living bombs have a time limit set by intentionally manipulating the timing of the hatching and activation of the ants. When stored, they are likely kept cold and they are put in a very hot and humid place when they are to be used. …If you breathe too erratically, you’ll bring up the temperature of the bathroom with your body temperature.”

“Aaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

If the orange exploded there, over 100 army ants would come overflowing into that small area.

Setali had nowhere to run.

Even if she clung to the ceiling, she would be overrun by army ants.

“How much did you have to do with this incident?” Mikoto asked as if dangling down a final lifeline.

She gave that terrible announcement that would send Setali down into an instant hell if she missed even a word.

“Where are the remaining oranges?”

Setali’s black eyes moved around unnaturally.

It looked like the orange in the center of the bathroom was sweating like human skin.

And then she saw the thick skin of the orange squirming from the inside.

That was her limit.

“I don’t know!! I really don’t know!! It’s true I was involved with Code EIC!! The research is continuing even now and we have intentionally spread rumors!! But I had nothing to do with that urban legend!! Code EIC was only intended to spread information that would raise the value of a given product. I never even thought about using it to spread creepy urban legends like that!!”

Setali felt like she was a human IC recorder. Unrelated to what she wished herself, she would tell any secret as long as someone pressed the button. It was quite pathetic. A woman of over 20 in tears and being talked down to by a middle school girl was simply pathetic.

“Why did you tell me the story of the very valuable orange?”

“I don’t know!! I just all of a sudden found myself telling the story!! I don’t even remember where exactly I heard about it!! But I must have heard it somewhere. You can check on your own where I found the information by checking my internet history or the digitally broadcasted television shows I watched!! But I don’t know!!”

“If Code EIC was used in this incident, then the higher ups in the shopping mall are the most suspicious. Do you have any idea who it could be?”

“Of course not!! It’s true that we are a cooperative institution of Academy City that carries out economic experiments and research such as Code EIC, so we do have a few unofficial groups. But none of them are anything like a terrorist group that wants to harm people!! This isn’t a city with movie-like villains such as obviously evil organizations or fixers that control everything from the shadows!!”

“…”

“Wait… I’m telling the truth!! I don’t know anything else!! So please let me out of here!! The orange…that orange is moving oddly!! Please…please save me…!!”

Setali heard a slight noise from the other side of the door.

Setali thought it was the sound of Mikoto leaving.

She thought she was being left behind in that nightmarish bathroom.

“W-waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

She screamed.

She could not help herself.

She felt that small bathroom had become her coffin.

But that was not what was happening.

Mikoto was moving the washing machine from in front of the door.

The door opened and Mikoto stepped into the bathroom.

“…Sorry about that.”

“Ah…uuh?”

Mikoto lightly picked up the orange from the center of the bathroom and Setali stared at her unable to believe her eyes.

Mikoto tore off the skin of the orange and showed Setali that nothing dangerous was inside.

“I cut the skin slightly with a knife and put margarine inside. The heat melted it and made it look like the skin was moving.”

“…”

Setali stared blankly for a bit.

Finally, she yelled like a beast and punched Mikoto in the face as hard as she could.

Mikoto did not even try to avoid it.

With her back slammed against the wall, Mikoto wiped the blood dripping from her split lip.

“If everything you said is true, then there really is someone out there who has set up oranges with crimson long-legged army ant eggs implanted inside.”

“…I thought I told you this city does not have any obviously evil organizations.”

“Yes.” Mikoto nodded. “So someone must be acting as if they are some dark group of “higher ups”. I don’t know if it’s someone from within the city or someone who has come in from outside, but I do know that these people actually exists and that they are causing dangerous incidents in the city.”

The city’s security guards still did not know that those people existed. Mikoto did not know if they would listen if Mikoto or Setali tried to tell them. It would be a problem if she was asked how she found out about Code EIC and a large scale incident could occur while she wasted time on that.

Having the living bombs full of ant eggs explode would be the worst possible situation.

“What are you going to do?” asked Setali. “How are you going to stop them?”

“I have no choice but to follow each hint I’ve been given.”

That said, all Mikoto had to work with were the security camera records, the reference to oranges by Lessar, and Setali who had told her about the urban legend. Two of those three had led to nothing.

That left only one.

“That Lessar seemed to know something, so I have to directly ask her about this.”

Chapter 3

Part 1

When Mikoto thought about it, the girl named Lessar had been suspicious from the beginning.

She had told Mikoto to watch out for oranges and she had left Mikoto the information on the existence of Project Code EIC that allowed rumors to be intentionally spread through the city in order to freely raise or lower how well entire stores sold as well as the information that Setali S. Skinikia had been involved in its research.

Simply put, Lessar was unlikely to be the person behind it all, but she still knew quite a bit about it.

Mikoto couldn’t have the girl holding back any information. She was not just playing some riddle solving game for fun. It would be faster to get Lessar to just tell her everything. Since Mikoto still did not know where the remaining living bombs were, she clearly did not have any time to spare.

She first needed to find where Lessar was and get her to explain everything in detail.

After that, her only option was to pursue whoever was behind it all by tracing back from the tricks done to the security camera records and the means of letting Setali know about the very valuable orange without her even noticing.

“…Dammit, jetlag is really kicking in.”

Mikoto slowly shook her head, but she did not think that would be enough to throw off her heavy sleepiness.

Dawn had already come.

She was in the outer area of the city with lines of tall buildings. It was still dim, but the trains would probably start running before long. Mikoto had wanted to finish things before things got packed full of people like in a theme park, but it had taken more time than she had expected to get Setali to talk.

It seemed Setali had been angered by the fact that someone had cut in and misused the research she was involved in for something like those living bombs. However, Mikoto had refused when the woman had asked to help. Setali’s movements were being checked by the other security guards. The plan had been to quickly hide her from a possible attack by Mikoto. If she suddenly changed that plan, the security guards would be suspicious. If it would only get in Mikoto’s way, there was no point in her helping.

“At any rate…”

She hid behind a pillar and checked to make sure no security guards were patrolling in the area.

“For now, I need to head back to that occult convenience store.”

Just as Mikoto had made up her mind what to do, she froze in place.

Whether they were just all-out ready to have some fun or they wanted to finish breakfast quickly to have more time for fun, there was already a fair amount of people walking around the area. And there were some people who were clearly different mixed in with the varied group of people.

They were security guards.

A gender-mixed group of three was walking through.

They were wearing outfits that stressed functionality and had protectors over their elbows and knees. The outfits looked something like the uniform to some new sport that was starting to spread among the youth but was still much too minor to be discussed at the dinner table. However, the batons, handguns, radios, etc. that they had at their waists and chests were much more serious looking. Unlike Japan, there was no law against guns, so you wouldn’t get arrested for carrying one, but no other people displayed the fact that they had a weapon quite to that extent.

With all the people moving around creating a flow of people, Mikoto would stand out if she remained frozen in place. Mikoto smoothly looked at the pillar while using a finger to mess with her bangs. She surreptitiously observed her surroundings as she did so.

(It doesn’t seem like they were rushed out here because they knew I was here.)

The three security guards may have been on a regular patrol or they may have been headed to their post because they had listless expressions on their faces. Their shoulders were slightly drooped. They slowly approached in Mikoto’s direction while chatting in Russian.

They had not noticed her yet.

But that was why she had to be very careful. She had to hide even the fact that she was being careful.

(Even if I can fool the sensors and cameras, I can’t do anything about the naked eye. It might be difficult to make it to the occult convenience store by the shortest route.)

Making sure not to enter the security guards’ field of vision, Mikoto circled around behind the pillar. She envisioned a simple map of the area in her head and thought about how to get to the store in a more circuitous way.

“Hm…? What are you doing there?” said a female voice from behind her.

“Mjaeh!?”

“…Oh, now that’s a face a girl shouldn’t show anyone.”

“Ah…Wha—You…?”

Mikoto immediately spun around and then froze up.

She wouldn’t go so far as to say she knew the girl, but she did recognize her.

It was the girl who had been at the occult convenience store who she was pretty sure was named Lancis.

Her short brown hair was held up in a headband accentuating her forehead. Her clothes were a lacrosse uniform-like set of a shirt, a miniskirt, and spats. Since she was wearing that outfit outside the store, it must not have been the uniform of the store.

Lancis tilted her head to the side in a way only teenage girls could.

“So what are you doing…?”

Mikoto pressed her back up against the pillar and spoke while keeping a cautious ear on the approaching footsteps of the security guards.

“Oh, I just have some business at your occult convenience store.”

“…? You mean Nihon Daruma?”

“I’m reluctant to speak the store’s name.”

Mikoto mumbled as she spoke, but Lancis did not seem to mind despite not being Japanese.

“What does having business with us have to do with sneaking around out here? Hm, are you the maiden type that does not want those around to know she’s buying good luck charms?”

“Honestly, I would think that would be the sensible thing to do if you were buying that kind of thing,” Mikoto said mildly denying the other girl’s reason to exist. “Technically, I have business with the girl named Lessar, not with the store itself. …And don’t you know about my situation? Lessar at least seemed to understand.”

“You mean that you’re being chased by the security guards?”

“…If you understand, then why did you call out to me like that? Well, I was at a dead end, so I guess I’m actually thankful.” Mikoto tapped on the pillar behind her with the back of her hand. “I was having a bit of trouble because of those security guards walking through over there. It was looking like it would be difficult to head straight for the occult convenience store, so I was thinking it would be faster to find a detour.”

Mikoto was able to remain calm during that situation because she could defeat them with force if it came down to it. However, once she used that easy-out card, everything would get a lot more difficult from then on.

“Hmm,” Lancis sighed leisurely…or rather, sleepily. “Well, whatever your reason, I have a feeling Bayloupe would furiously explode if I left a customer stranded.”

“?”

Mikoto frowned as Lancis suddenly grabbed her arm.

She started pulling on it.

“This way.”

“Hah? Eh? Wait, where are you taking me!?”

“Into the crowd,” was Lancis’s brief answer. “Just taking a detour isn’t enough. To fool the naked eye, it is best to camouflage yourself among people.”

Part 2

Now then, who exactly was this girl named Lancis with the headband?

Since she was an acquaintance of Lessar's, it was possible that she was not some harmless teenager and that idea grew within Mikoto as they moved on.

She was like a spy.

That said, she was not the showy and gaudy type of individual who pulled various secret gadgets from a tuxedo and won magnificent firefights against 100 agents.

She was quite the opposite.

She was natural. Even though Mikoto was being chased by the security guards, the two girls did not speed up their pace pushed on by the desire to just run and flee. Instead, they merely naturally walked along following the flow of people.

At the same time, Lancis did not forget to keep in mind what to do in an emergency. She paid close attention to various entrances and exits like side streets or buildings they could quickly rush into. She also kept a proper distance so they would not run into any security guards when turning a corner or something. It was possible that she was also constantly calculating out how to cause a panic among the passersby and what direction the people would flow in were a panic to occur.

Mikoto still had some slight doubts, but she did admit that the girl was useful in that situation.

"Why?" Mikoto sighed as if she were truly suspicious of something. "Why are we heading for a leisure pool of all places this early in the morning?"

"The water temperature is regulated by a boiler and last night was a hot night, so

I’m betting the pool was crowded the instant it opened. The leisure pool has five entrances, so if we slip in with the crowd and cut through, we can exit almost right next to Nihon Daruma.” Lancis used a small hand to make a slight adjustment to her headband. “And heading through the pool is advantageous for us on the security front.”

“?”

“The security guards cannot enter the pool facility that heavily armed. The inside of the pool facility and the outside are under different jurisdictions for the security guards. And in the women only corner, the jurisdiction is even further broken down. By passing through different areas of jurisdiction, they cannot continually patrol the entire area we’re passing through.”

“I see.”

It was something like heading into a women only train or a women’s changing room while being chased by a man.

“And it’ll be even easier to hide within the crowd by completely changing our visual appearance in the changing room. Yeah, it’s a little stupid sounding, but it makes sense. …But I don’t have a swimsuit.”

“Tah dah.”

“Why were you walking around with swimsuits for two people?”

“They’re supposed to be products for the store. They’re cheap and simple bathing sets. Choose a master and an apprentice and you too can attempt a pretend baptism. By incorporating the symbol of the nude body to its fullest, they have a bare minimum of holiness so that they cannot be mocked as merely indecent scraps of cloth.”

As Lancis spoke on about things Mikoto did not understand at all, she pushed one of the clear plastic bags containing a swimsuit in Mikoto’s direction.

From what Mikoto could see of the triangular cloth, it was…

(Why a bikini…?)

Mikoto stubbornly looked over at the other swimsuit in Lancis’s hand, but the cloth folded up in that plastic bag looked like it had parts made of strings, too. There was likely not much difference between them. Mikoto guessed that the other girl’s choice had been based on nothing more than something along the lines of liking one color better than the other.

Mikoto gave up in various ways and looked at the warning label at the top of the package.

From what it said about the size…

“Kh. I don’t fall under the recommended cup sizes…!!”

Of course, she could likely manage by adjusting the length of the strings, but she would not be able to get rid of the feeling that it was a little too big for her.

Now, between a girl forcing a too big cup size onto herself and a young lady forcing herself into a too small cup size, which one was better?

As Mikoto thought about that, she noticed a slight look of pity in Lancis’s eyes.

The girl in the headband then spoke.

“When I spoke with Bayloupe and Lessar and they decided that my cup size would work as a standard for the lowest it was quite humiliating, but I never expected my heart to be saved by negativity like this…”

“Shut up!! Let’s just get to the leisure pool’s changing room!!”

“?”

“…Why did that make you look confused?”

A chill ran down Mikoto’s spine and she had a very bad feeling about what Lancis was going to say next.

“We aren’t going to the changing room.”

“Hah?”

“Security guards are constantly stationed around the changing rooms as a counter measure against perverts. It’s more a way of gaining trust than something that’s actually necessary, but we still have to avoid going through there if we’re going to avoid getting caught.”

“Th-then, what are we going to do?”

“We’ll sneak in through an employee entrance, cut across the side of the leisure pool, and then leave through a different employee entrance. But it would be unnatural to cut across the poolside in our normal clothes, so we need to change into the swimsuits.”

“Umm? Wait a second. If we’re going to head in through a back entrance like that, we won’t be going through the normal changing rooms, right? But isn’t the employee changing room just a small locker room? We’ll have no idea when someone could come in or take a break or something. Can we really safely change there?”

“Like I said, we aren’t going to the changing room.” Lancis’s expression did not change at all as she concluded her thought. “Any of the changing rooms.”

“...”

Railgun, the #3 and the Ace of Tokiwadai, felt like her mouth turned into an X-mark for an instant.

“Um, then…where will we change…?”

“There.”

Lancis was pointing into the shadows of a narrow, narrow alley between buildings.

Part 3

“I don’t understand. I just don’t understand!! There are tons of people going by out front. We’re just 10 meters away from being in broad daylight!! Why do we have to change here!?” yelled Misaka.

She had changed into and out of a dress the day before, but the hurdle between indoors and outdoors was just too great.

On the other hand, Lancis spoke completely calmly.

“If we just head down the alley and around the corner, we’ll be right at one of the staff entrance’s to the leisure pool. There are too many people going by within the facility and stripping down in the passageway would stand out too much.”

“Well, that may be true if you think about it logically, but for a maiden of 14 going on 15 who’s about ready to head back to the first half of her teens, an area in the open where all sorts of footsteps can be heard is not the place where she is going to reach for the hook of her skir-dgbh!?”

Mikoto had been quietly complaining all by herself, but she had started coughing upon looking down at Lancis’s waist.

Lancis was already completely devoid of clothing to the point that Mikoto half expected to hear a “supo~n” sound effect.

This led Mikoto to go back to yelling.

“How!? How can a teenage girl do that!? How can you put your hands on your hips and strike a daunting pose with a sleepy look in your eyes!!!???”

“?”

“Tilting your head again!?”

It seemed things would truly not continue until Mikoto headed down that path herself. Mikoto reached for the hook of her skirt half in desperation. After a small click, she then undid the zipper.

Her mentality crossed a certain line.

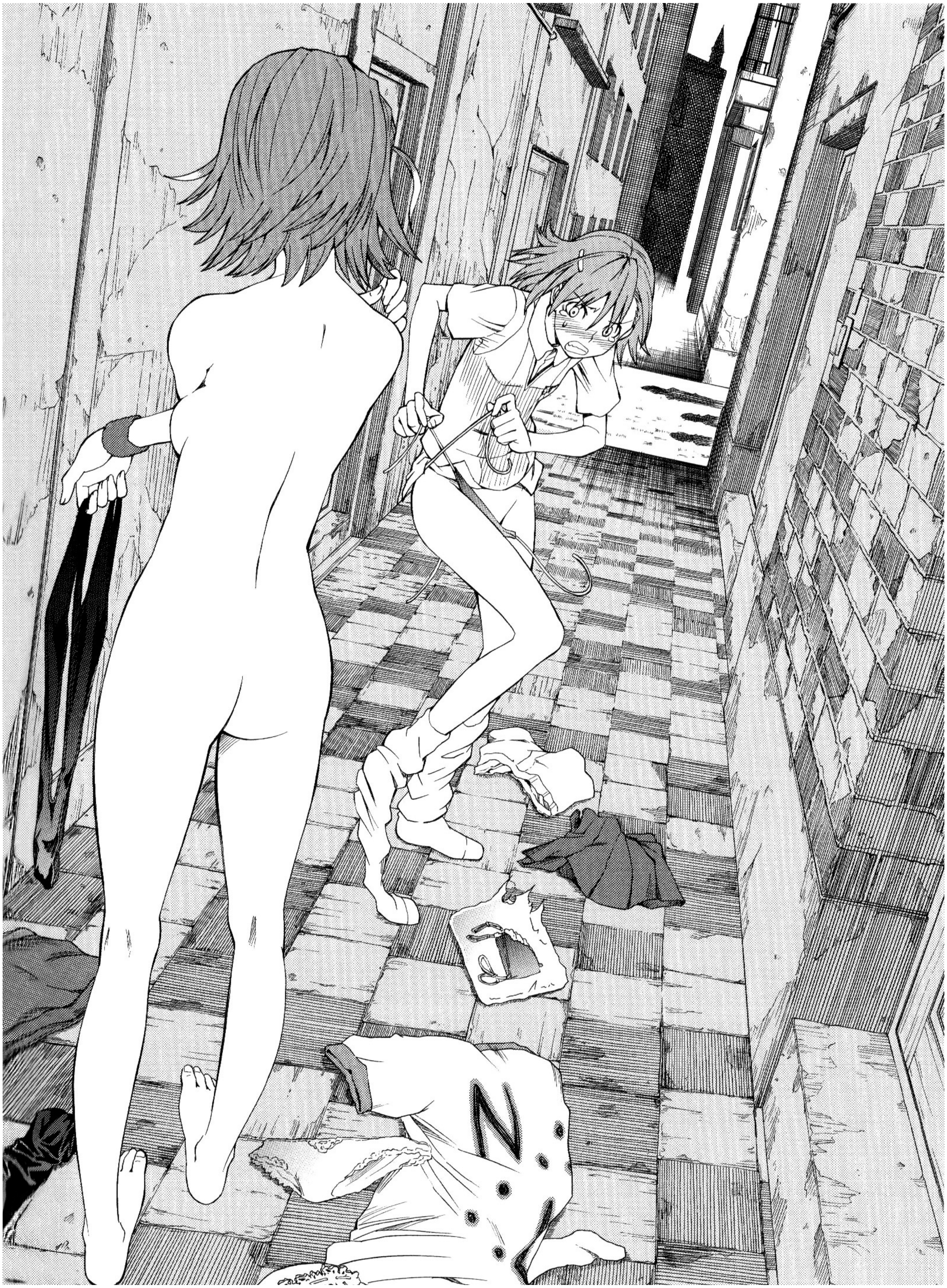
After the skirt dropped to the ground, she still had shorts on, so she was still technically safe. However, her tension still somehow snapped at that point. She energetically continued while giving slight cries of encouragement to herself that had not a hint of sexiness to them.

With the lower half of her body oddly breezy, Mikoto grabbed the swimsuit package. However, there was no sign of the clear plastic bag tearing no matter how she pulled on it.

(Ohhh!! I’m having a fierce struggle with something ridiculous while in a ridiculous state of dress!!)

While watching that furious battle, Lancis spoke up.

“…Yours is a bikini, so couldn’t you have at least put the bottom on before removing your skirt?”



“Mgyaahhh!!!!”

Being given that suggestion once it was too late, Mikoto’s blushing reached its maximum. However, this must have made her put extra strength into her struggle because the swimsuit package made a tearing noise and ripped apart like a rice cracker.

(I need to get this on and cover myself up as quickly as possible!!)

Mikoto quickly grabbed up the triangular piece of cloth. However, a bikini and a two-piece were similarly shaped but different in the details. In other words, both sides were as narrow as strings and the one Mikoto was trying to put on was held on by tying the strings together.

The fierce struggle reached its second stage.

She just had to tie two bowknots, so it should not have been too difficult, but having to cover things up as she caught glimpses of things on the road seemed to be sending Mikoto’s head to the boiling point. Her trembling fingertips would not complete the simple task no matter how many times she tried.

Meanwhile, the nude girl named Lancis continued changing at her own slow pace.

“Chiralism is reaching a new age…”

“I don’t want to hear that from a girl who is so open that there’s nothing to just ‘catch a glimpse’ of!!”

“Tah dah. My swimsuit is a V slingshot, the gold standard of the sexy swimsuit.”

“Since you were just completely nude, there’s no surprise to that!!”

Mikoto yelled abuse at the other girl, pole vaulted over the wall of embarrassment, and headed into the third stage of the fierce struggle which was changing into the top. Finally, Mikoto managed to finish changing.

“…Done. No, I can’t relax. Being out on the streets in a bikini is embarrassing enough on its own. I can’t let my reference point be destroyed by this.”

“Mh. If I don’t adjust some angles, some unwanted hair will be visible…” said Lancis as she stared at her crotch and started tugging on the cloth. As a fellow girl, Mikoto did not want to look directly at that pose or that action.

After having her mentality worn down terribly, Mikoto followed Lancis to the leisure pool’s staff entrance. They had stuffed their clothes into the clear packages the swimsuits had come in. The school uniform would retain its characteristic look even when folded up, so Mikoto was a little worried about the fact that the packages were clear, but it was still less noticeable than carrying the uniform out in the open.

The staff entrance was not locked.

They passed by men and women in racing swimsuits who seemed to be workers a few times, but they just waved and did not try to stop the girls.

“Their swimsuits are quite different from ours, but they don’t seem to mind.”

“Workers with different duties have different types of swimsuits. Those were most likely the lifeguards. The waitresses and such would probably be closer to what we’re wearing.”

“(What kind of duty is there that makes that V slingshot not seem suspicious?)”

“Heh heh heh. In a facility where all sorts of fun and pleasures gather, some services will have a bit of sexiness added in. When that happens, swimsuits can transform into all sorts of psychedelic things.”

“Hm, is that so?” Mikoto said with a feeling that felt like incomplete combustion.

Along with Lancis, she headed to the poolside outside of the passageway.

Now that she actually saw the facility, she thought it was actually quite something.

The area was two or three sizes bigger than the entire area taken up by a school building, the schoolyard, and the gym.

Heading around the outer edge was a waterway-like pool that made complex curves. A number of waterslides twisted and turned above their heads and the inner area surrounded by the waterway-like pool was filled with many smaller pools. Each pool must have had some special feature to it.

Mikoto looked around the entire area to see if any pool security guards were patrolling around.

“It doesn’t look like there are any shops. I guess there won’t be any appearances by a questionable waitress.”

“It’s set up so you order through the Semipublic AR and a waitress comes out to the location the order was made from. By paying extra, you can get them to come out wearing various outfits.”

“Hmm. So, how are we going to get through? Are we going to circle around the outside edge?”

“30 meters away at 10 o’clock. …Don’t turn your head. The one wearing the lifejacket is a security guard. He hasn’t noticed us because he’s helping a lost child, but he’ll probably notice us eventually if we just walk along the poolside.”

“What do we do?”

“Splash.” Expressionless as ever, Lancis pointed toward the curving pool that headed around the outer edge of the area. “Getting in the water won’t look suspicious and we’ll be harder to find if we hide everything but our heads underwater.”

“I see.”

Mikoto and Lancis headed for the water’s edge without any warming up exercises. Mikoto thought it would be least suspicious to elegantly put her legs in first, but from the boys and girls of a similar age she could see, the proper thing to do at the leisure pool was to just dive in making a large splash.

Mikoto and Lancis had the plastic bags with their clothes in them, but the people around them were playing in the pool with their things in clear bags.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Mikoto and Lancis unhesitatingly jumped from the poolside.

Mikoto felt herself pierce the wall of water. She could hear the water rushing past her and the muffled noise of the splash. A chill wrapped about her body seeming like it would rob her of all her body temperature. For an instant, Mikoto mistakenly forgot the situation and just enjoyed how good it felt.

Immediately afterwards, she returned to her senses.

The reason for this was simple. Mikoto was wearing a bikini that was made of strings and cloth.

In other words, the force of the water had started to slide the top of her bikini up as she had plunged into the water. If it continued in that direction…

“Cough cough cough!!”

With her head still underwater, Mikoto frantically covered her chest with both hands and used all her strength to stop the cloth from continuing on its independent course. She then slid the cup portion back to its original position.

Paying no heed to her choking in the bubble-filled water, Mikoto reached her hands back behind herself to check on the knots in the bikini’s strings. It seemed the knots themselves had not suffered any damage.

(Ahh, no!! I don’t want to narrowly avoid death in a situation like this!!)

That was when her gaze met with another’s under the water.

Mikoto had fumbled around at super high speed to check on her own swimsuit, but she now saw Lancis who had jumped in at the same time.

The V slingshot had been shifted in an unthinkable way by the water and Mikoto could clearly see a certain spot she would much rather not.

“Cough cough!!”

Mikoto used all her strength to hold down Lancis who was fully enjoying the water paradise with her arms spread wide into the air. Letting a girl stay in a situation like that was unforgivable for a fellow girl.

Once the two of them had their appearance back to a bare minimum level of acceptable, Mikoto finally lifted her head out from the water.

Lancis’s head was floating there next to her.

“…For now, let’s just float along with the current of the pool.”

“How far are we going to float?”

“To the third staff entrance. It’s on the complete opposite side. We’ll pass by a security guard station on the way, so make sure to look completely natural while we do.”

And so the two of them began travelling through the water like ninja.

Mikoto and Lancis headed on like crocodiles traveling through the Amazon River looking for prey.

It had nothing to do with their situation, but Mikoto realized that it did not matter if they were wearing a bikini and a slingshot if they were in the water like that.

Part 4

The two girls slowly continued through the pool heading around the outer edge of the facility and then snuck out the staff entrance.

Once they made it to the back alley, Mikoto had to face temporary embarrassment once more as she and Lancis changed. Once Mikoto was back in her school uniform and Lancis was back in her lacrosse uniform-like outfit, the latter girl spoke.

“Just to be safe, we should split up here.”

“Good idea.”

“Head north along that street and enter the building through the door on your left. Nihon Daruma will be right there. Since you’ve been there twice before, you should be able to recognize it.”

“What will you do?”

“Unlike you, the security guards aren’t searching for me, so I don’t need to hide. Heading there normally without hiding will be the least suspicious course of action for me. I’ll head right through the middle of the security guards and gather some information as I do. I should be able to tell whether they have realized you’re here or not by how they’re acting.”

“Sorry for the trouble.”

“I am in the service business after all.”

After splitting up with Lancis, Mikoto headed to the occult convenience store by the shortest route. On the way, she was worried about her unnaturally wet hair drawing attention, but it seemed she was just being overanxious.

She reached the occult convenience store in the tenant area without any troubles.

She was naturally nervous.

As the sliding door opened, she heard bustling voices from within.

“Nyaah!! Ow! That really hurts!! Bayloupe, didn’t they teach you in school that a girl’s ass needs to be treated in a more seductive manner!? No matter how much you criticize me, my eyes aren’t going to be ‘opened to the truth’!!”

Mikoto peered inside the store and saw the person she was trying to find being held and spanked.

The person spanking Lessar was a tall girl with short silver hair.

“I’ve told you!! So many times!! Not to give normal people!! Unnecessary information!! Lessar!! From what I’ve heard while listening in on the security guards, that middle school girl fell right into the trap and is now forced to stay on the run!! That means part of the responsibility lies with us!! What part of that was ‘for the sake of England’!?”

They were speaking in English.

And it was British English instead of American English.

“Um…” Mikoto cut in apologetically and the two convenience store workers looked her way.

Lessar was still being held by the girl with the silver hair and her teary face lit up.

“Nyaah! Nyaah! Help! Nyaah! Help!! Was my information helpful!? Please tell Bayloupe how helpful that postcard was!! She’s the girl here who hopes to become a sadistic instructor!! If you do, she’ll end this unfair torture!!”

“Hm? Are you the middle school girl our Lessar was causing trouble for?”

The silver haired girl had a nametag reading “Bayloupe” on her abundant chest.

Mikoto waved around the postcard she had gotten from Lessar.

"I followed this postcard you gave me and attacked Setali, but she turned out to be a surprisingly good person, so I came to get a refund."

"Lessaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!"

"No!! I only gave her a hint regarding the incident. I never said anything about who was behind it! Gyahh gyahh gyahh! That really hurts!!"

After the repeated strikes seemed about to make smoke come from her butt due to friction, Lessar was finally released. After being released from Bayloupe's arms, she fell limply down to the ground.

Paying no heed to her miniskirt and panties, she lay face down in an odd way with only her butt sticking up into the air and looked up at Mikoto.

"…S-so, what are you here for?"

"To ask you some fundamental questions. I need something more than the half-assed hint from this postcard. It would be fastest if you just told me everything you know."

"…"

Still collapsed on the ground, Lessar moved her head over and timidly looked at Bayloupe. The silver-haired girl sighed.

"This is past the stage where we can keep you away by saying it would be safer if normal people didn't get involved, isn't it? Lessar, this all got so complicated because of you, so you explain it."

"U-Understood. To be honest, I'd really rather not do this, but my desire to not have Bayloupe hit me anymore is greater, so ask me whatever you want."

"Okay. Then let's start with…"

Mikoto folded her arms and thought for a bit before asking her question.

"…Is it true you started wearing a bra in fourth grade?"

Part 5

“Yes, it is. At the time, I could freely draw the attention of all the boys in my class with the slightest movement which was pretty fun, but it was more embarrassing than anything. After all, being the one person to stand out in a group is pretty tough. Although when I think back on it, my development was pretty normal.”

Once Mikoto brought up that topic, she all of a sudden was being looked down on.

It seemed Lessar had instantly scanned Mikoto’s body type and gotten a general idea of how things had been for her. She was clearly speaking in a way that used breast size to determine someone’s status as a human being.

“But really I was less worried about how big they were getting or anything like that and more afraid of the strange pain that comes with the growth. After all, when I asked my female friends, they all said they didn’t have any pain like that, so I got all worried thinking I had some kind of strange disease. I ended up asking Bayloupe about it and she just laughed at me.”

“Um, okay, can we get to the real subject at hand…?”

“Ha ha ha. I don’t know the trick to making them big. Mine just grew this way on their own. Oh, and the myth about them growing if you drink milk doesn’t seem to have any basis to it, so don’t take it seriously.”

“Shut up or I’ll kill you, you giant breasted midget!!” yelled Mikoto with bluish-white sparks flying from her bangs and Lessar finally lowered her raised nose and ended her solo performance.

“…So what is this real subject at hand you mentioned?”

“The oranges! The living bombs using crimson long-legged army ant eggs!! The series of incidents using the urban legend of the very valuable orange!!”

“Oh, that. Since you said you understood the postcard, I’m guessing you figured out about Project Code EIC.”

“That’s the plan in this city to purposefully manipulate rumors to freely raise or lower the values of selected products in order to freely change how well entire stores sell. When it is used, a third party can spread rumors either good or bad about a product regardless of its actual value in order to profit. If it is used properly, it is possible that a country could be pushed up to being a major power or that an enemy country could be destroyed without firing a single bullet.”

“It is known as Economic Intelligence Control or EIC for short. Honestly, it kind of seems like a giant ‘fuck you’ to capitalism. This goes beyond even a cartel. Although maybe this is actually more natural in a country like Russia…” Lessar sat down on the ground. “This incident involving the oranges and Code EIC must have some kind of connection. At the very least, there’s a definite connection in how the very valuable orange urban legend managed to spread so quickly. That story was originally only spreading through Academy City, but it ended up becoming popular here in the shopping mall, too.”

“Who’s doing it? And why?”

“You said you attacked Setali. What did she say?”

“She said there were no convenient ‘higher ups working behind the scenes’ in this city. She also said that Code EIC was being used by a third party unrelated to those who developed it.”

“…Hmm.” Lessar grinned. “In that case, the current enemy is some third party claiming to be the higher ups.”

“You’re saying there’s some other true criminal behind this? But that…”

“I don’t know for sure, but doesn’t that seem more natural than it just being the true higher ups of the shopping mall? It makes more sense for someone else to be interfering than for the people who created this city to be trying to destroy it.”

“…”

Mikoto had thought through it all that far in Setali’s apartment.

She could make as many guesses as she wanted, but what she truly wanted was something she could be sure of that would lead to what she should do next.

“You’ve been looking into Code EIC longer than me, right? How exactly do they control the rumors that manipulate the values of things? It’s simple enough to say someone is interfering, but is there an opening someone could get in through? If we knew how they do these things, we might be able to figure out where the person behind all this is.”

“Nnn, I have a fairly good guess,” Lessar said ambiguously.

She was acting triumphant, but Mikoto was not going to allow her to evade the questions anymore.

“Wait. This has to do with those living bombs. If we don’t do anything, those oranges will scatter tons of crimson long-legged army ants around wherever they have been placed. We can’t just sit around and not do anything.”

“…But I think there is a surprising limitation on where they can be placed.”

“?”

“You’ve probably realized it by now, but the time limit for the living bombs is regulated using temperature and humidity. By artificially regulating the environment to one suitable for the hatching and activation of the ants, an ‘explosion’ can be caused intentionally. …As such, where the first bomb was placed is rather important.”

“It was near the entrance at the east gate…” Mikoto trailed off because she had realized something. “I see.”

“Yes. This is a hot summer day. The automatic doors are constantly opening and closing causing the outside heat and the inside air conditioning to mix together. The temperature and humidity would be exceedingly irregular near the entrance. And yet the living bomb was placed there where it detonated despite the fact that we assumed the environment had to be regulated to cause them to hatch and activate. …In other words, we just need to think back from there.”

“So the eggs won’t hatch and grow to adulthood except in an extreme environment.”

“They are truly special ants. I wonder how they manage to hatch in the natural world. Maybe they live in the mountains where the weather changes a lot. Well, I suppose that characteristic is what allows them to remain stable while stored and used as living bombs.”

If that were true, it was a major development. Investigating every single part of an area larger than 650 domed stadiums was difficult, but that changed if they could predict where they would be set beforehand. If they focused their search on the areas where the temperature or humidity was constantly changing due to artificial means, they may be able to find the living bombs and it was even possible they could come across whoever was behind it all in the middle of setting up one of them.

“But that is not enough to relax,” said Mikoto clearly while looking Lessar in the eye. “That kind of environment could be purposefully created by alternating between using a cooler and a dryer, so this isn’t perfect. I really just want any information I can get to chase after whoever is behind this.”

“True.”

“Let’s go back to what you were talking about before. Do you know how someone could interfere with Code EIC? If we know how whoever is behind this is doing it, we might be able to find where they are.”

“Hm. It’s not that I’m holding back any information, but…”

At that time, Bayloupe suddenly looked up while dusting off the magazine rack. Her eyes were wide with shock and she quickly moved away from the magazine rack.

“Get down!!”

“…It looks like I don’t have time to give a detailed explanation.”

Immediately afterwards, something large broke through the wall and crashed into the occult convenience store.

It was an overwhelmingly large mass of steel.

With that one strike, the building materials were smashed to pieces and the magazine rack on that wall was knocked over sending its contents flying. The damage did not end there. The other shelves of products were forcefully knocked over as the mass of steel mercilessly plowed right into the center of the store.

“Construction equipment!?” shouted Mikoto.

The construction equipment had thick treads like on a tank and a hydraulic arm on the front which had a giant bucket on the end. A snowplow had likely been switched out for the bucket. The bucket was about as wide as the vehicle itself and it was oddly large. The fact that Mikoto had not heard its approach meant it likely ran on electricity.

“Why is something like that here!?”

“This is the world’s largest shopping mall. They sell everything here, remember?”

It was an obvious attack.

The shopping mall was huge, but they were still within a single store of a giant indoor facility. Even though there were not too many people around just after dawn, it was still insane to drive a piece of construction equipment all the way there.

“What do you think?” asked Lessar with a fearless smile on her face. “Is this from whoever is behind all this? Or is this a new face of the security guards? I’d say the odds are about 70% that this is whoever is behind this, and the remaining 30% is taken up by the possibility that the security guards are disguising themselves as whoever is behind all this.”

“It doesn’t really matter which it is.” Sparks flew from Mikoto’s bangs. “Anyone who is going to get in our way and try to stop us despite knowing about the living bombs should be treated like an enemy, don’t you think?”

“Sigh. Whether you’re Railgun or whatever, you can still get killed. There’s no real need for you to charge right into the middle of the danger, is there?”

“…You realized who I am?”

“I’d think it would have been odd for someone not to after everything that’s happened.”

“Then I’m guessing you’ve figured out that it’s best to not get in my way.”

“Sorry for interrupting you while you’re getting all fired up,” Lessar pointed toward the driver’s seat, “but there’s no one aboard. Who exactly are you planning to fight with?”

“Wha—?”

When Mikoto looked over at the driver’s seat she saw that the seat was empty and that there were a few small devices and cameras set up there instead. The attack was being carried out by remote control using a radio.

And she also saw what seemed to be cylindrical explosive connected by several colorful cables.

She was not given time to deal with the problem rationally.

Immediately afterwards, the snowplow exploded in the middle of the occult convenience store.

Part 6

Of course, that abnormal situation was immediately reported to the security guards that protected the peace of that shopping mall.

“There’s been an explosion!! It seems a piece of construction equipment broke into the facility and exploded inside a store!!”

“First ants and now car bombs?”

While asking that question to her fellow security guard, Enirya G. Algonskaya ran toward an opened area of the guard station.

The shopping mall was an exceedingly large commerce facility. It was also a flat building because it was much wider than it was tall. The shortest route to an area was to just cut straight through the facility, but they could not drive through the stores full of customers in a patrol car.

That was why the security guards used helicopters instead of patrol cars.

They used rather large models that could fit over 8 people in the back. That was both because it functioned as a space to take in people who were being arrested and because Russia had a long history of developing helicopters. …Simply put, it was a civilian-use model of the military helicopter known as the Hind.

The security guards would use those large helicopters to take a shortcut across the shortest path and then lower their personnel down to the vast rooftop of the facility. Then they would just have to head in through the doors leading inside. That way they could always take action quickly without having to worry about the flood of tourists.

Their main defining characteristic could be said to be the great number of communications antennae they were equipped with to ensure investigations ran smoothly. They had normal radio antennae as well as ones that could access communications satellites used for cell phones.

“Where did it occur!?”

“Once we get up there, you’ll be able to tell. You’ll see the dark smoke it created,” said Enirya’s colleague as she climbed into the pilot’s seat of the helicopter. “…Do you think this is connected to the ant case?”

“I can’t say anything at this stage,” Enirya said as she sat in the support seat directly behind the pilot’s seat. “But if there are any suspects at the scene, we’ll need to get the full story from them.”

Part 7

A low vibration shook one section of the shopping mall. A great amount of dust filled the passageway like after a space shuttle launch. The explosive seemed to do more damage with its shockwave than its flames and all four walls of the occult convenience store were utterly blown away. There was no need to ask what happened to the things within.

But Mikoto ran as quickly as she could cutting through all the dust.

“Dammit!! They certainly are doing this in a showy way!!”

Sounds of clattering metal could continually be heard. It was the sound of Mikoto casting aside the different objects such as metal panels she had magnetically gathered from the store to act as a shield.

“That sure is convenient,” said Lessar seeming to arbitrarily praise Mikoto as she ran alongside her with a nonchalant expression. “Thanks to that, things were a little easier for me.”

“Wait, is that other girl okay? You know, the one named Bayloupe.”

“She’s fine, she’s fine. She just used a different route to escape. I can hear her yelling complaints in my ear this very instant.”

“?”

Lessar did not seem to have any kind of communications equipment in her ear and Mikoto could not detect any radio waves, but it seemed the girl was communicating in some way.

(…Are they using infrared or something?)

“That construction equipment was targeting us because we were investigating that incident.”

“Yeah. It’s possible it was trying to prevent me from giving my demonstration, but given the timing, it more likely has to do with the living bombs.”

Even in that situation, Lessar had a huge grin on her face.

“But we learned something else interesting from this.”

“What?”

“Assuming that construction equipment was an attack from whoever is behind this, then it means the living bombs are not their only weapon. They can acquire normal explosives like that and yet they are still sticking with using the crimson long-legged army ants. An explosive that can be detonated at the press of a button would be easier to simply cause a disturbance with, but they’re sticking with the ants.”

“Are you saying that their objective is hidden in creating an incident following the urban legend being spread using Code EIC?”

Mikoto and Lessar stopped and supported themselves on a pillar while they caught their breath.

“Well, it would probably be faster to just capture whoever is behind this and have them tell us that kind of thing.”

“How?” Mikoto frowned. “They even had that pain-in-the-ass remote controlled construction equipment prepared to cover their tracks.”

“Given the circumstances around you, I’m betting whoever is behind this realized you have great power during the incident with the first orange and they are advancing their plan accordingly. They sent out a remote controlled attack because they know they would lose in a direct confrontation.”

“So?”

“Can that great power of yours be of any use to us now?” Lessar pointed toward her own temple. “For example, can you track the source of the signal used for the remote control?”

“I see.” Mikoto realized what Lessar was getting at. “But the construction equipment already blew up. I doubt they are going to just continue sending out the signal.”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” said Lessar just as a painful noise became audible. “It seems they have sent a second one.”

The sound of the treads digging into the floor ominously rang out. A giant piece of construction equipment appeared from around a corner in the passageway. As before, they had not been able to hear it until it got very close. It seemed electric vehicles were well suited to be weapons.

“Get down!!” Mikoto yelled as she pushed down on Lessar’s head.

That very same instant, the pillar was blown away with consecutive explosive noises. A rain of 7.62 mm bullets had cut horizontally across.

Thankfully, there had been no customers in the area.

“Look at the driver’s seat. The glass has been removed and a light machine gun is fixed to the arm and motor. That’s what just said hi.”

“That drum-like object in the seat might be full of bullets. If so, that thing could have 30,000 shots.”

“I guess it’ll spread around all of its bullets and then blow up.”

“You can control electricity and electromagnetic waves, right? So could you destroy its battery and interfere with the radio waves controlling it?”

“I tried to do that back in the occult convenience store to stop that one from detonating, but it just switched modes and blew up.”

Suddenly, they heard some loud dry noises. They seemed to be gunshots, but they were not the same as the ones from before. These ones sounded somehow lighter.

A few sparks flew from the surface of the construction equipment.

Mikoto thought someone must have been attacking it, so she peeked out from behind the pillar. As soon as she did, her eyes widened in shock and her body stiffened.

She had spotted some of the people who protected the peace of that city wielding handguns while hiding behind a corner in the intersection with another passageway up ahead.

In other words…

“No way… The security guards noticed this and came rushing over!?”

“Oh, my. That certainly is not the kind of reinforcements a wanted person wants, is it?”

And it looked like those reinforcements could not necessarily be relied on.

The handguns they were armed with were meant to be used against humans, so they could not penetrate the steel sheets making up the construction equipment. Because of its undercarriage and treads, they could not blow out a tire either. The security guards fired some warning shots and demanded the driver to stop, but they soon realized that no one was sitting in the driver’s seat.

That was when the light machine gun in the driver’s seat started to move.

“Get back!! Hurry!!”

Mikoto did not know if her shout had reached them or not.

Immediately afterwards, the light machine gun began its attack on the commerce institution. The wall of the corner the security guards were hiding behind crumbled like a pile of sand being struck by a shovel. It seemed the security guards had immediately turned around, but Mikoto could not tell from her position whether they were fine or not.

“…Let’s take this chance to escape,” suggested Lessar.

“What?”

“We’re up against someone who is persistent and attacking us from a safe area, but he also seems to be an idiot who loses his cool surprisingly easily. He’s leaving us, his true targets, alone in order to focus on the security guards.” Lessar waved her index finger lightly. “But I’m sure he’ll remember his objective before long. The smart thing to do would be to get out of here before that happens.”

“But…”

Just as Mikoto started speaking, some people who seemed to be the security guards peeked out from behind the corner of the destroyed passageway in a temporary break in the light machine gun fire. She recognized one of the people holding a handgun. It was the female security guard named Enirya.

Mikoto thought she was still trying to continue her futile attack on the construction equipment, but…

“Oh, watch out.”

“!?”

Immediately after Lessar let out a lighthearted warning and Mikoto hurriedly hid behind the broken pillar, Enirya opened fire on them instead of the construction equipment.

“Is that idiot still obsessing over me!?”

“I already told you. Whether it’s the construction equipment or the security guards, it will only get in our way if they are no longer focusing on the other. It would be best to have them take each other out.”

As they spoke, the light machine gun began firing on the security guards once more. The tremendous sound of gunfire reverberated through the air. On top of that, the construction equipment used its treads to move while it kept up the gunfire. It moved in the direction of the center of the intersection between the two passageways. It was making sure it could see past the corner the security guards were using for cover.

Those security guards no longer had anywhere to hide.

And at the same time, they could not stop the large piece of equipment with just handguns.

"…"

"Wait, why are you pulling a coin out of your skirt pocket?"

"Do I really need to spell out to you what I'm about to do?"

"Don't do that…" Lessar interjected as if she were fed up with Mikoto. "It doesn't get you anything. They aren't going to stop seeing you as a suspect just because you saved them. And even if you are an esper, you'll still die if you're shot or caught in an explosion, right? That exceeds the level of risk you can take."

"I haven't done anything to feel guilty about." While not knowing when bullets could come flying her way, Mikoto peered out from behind the pillar in order get her timing right. "So I have no reason to fear or hate the security guards."

"Oh," Lessar muttered while looking up toward heaven.

Mikoto spoke without looking in Lessar's direction.

"You stay here. You have no reason to go with me and both of us getting taken out would not help anything. If I truly do get taken out, then you go find whoever is controlling this construction equipment. Do you understand?"

She did not wait for an answer.

The security guards did not have the time to spare.

Mikoto made sure that the light machine gun was making slight adjustments to aim at the security guards and therefore not at her. She then charged out from behind the pillar.

Immediately afterwards, the light machine gun started turning in her direction and bullets even flew her direction from the security guards, but Mikoto unhesitatingly ran toward the construction equipment.

She was a few dozen meters away.

It was only a narrow margin, but Mikoto managed to get underneath the construction equipment before the light machine gun managed to get her completely in its sights.

That’s right, underneath.

She had jumped to the ground and had slid head first between the treads on either side.

While still face down, she pressed her clenched fist against the ground like she was pressing a stamp.

Her thumb was on top.

She fired the arcade coin on top of the thumb straight up!!

With an explosive roar, the “bullet” was fired at three times the speed of sound and pulverized the construction equipment.

It went well beyond the level of blowing a hole in it.

The vehicle rose up a few meters from the ground and was then crushed in midair.

While still sprawled out on the ground, Mikoto rolled to the side.

After hanging in the air for a few seconds, the remains of the construction equipment fell down like a suspended ceiling. Mikoto had almost made it out of the way when she heard a slight electronic noise.

It was just a quiet beep.

At the same time, the glowing red point of light in the driver’s seat turned green.

(It knows it can no longer be controlled, so it’s switched to detonation mode!!)

Mikoto frantically stood up and leapt behind the corner of the intersection. Just as she jumped, she had a thought.

(Oh, crap.)

The security guards were behind that corner.

“Misaka Mikoto!!”

As Mikoto had expected, a gun was being aimed at her along with that warning.

With their backs pressed up against metal shutters on opposite walls of the passageway, Mikoto and the security guard named Enirya glared at each other.

Mikoto paid the gun barrel no heed and spoke.

“I don’t think this is any time to be doing that.”

“What are you…!?”

Enirya was not able to finish her sentence.

Immediately afterwards, the snowplow Mikoto had destroyed with her Railgun exploded. Even though she had escaped around a corner into the other passageway, a shockwave blew through the tunnel. Both Mikoto and Enirya were knocked to the side. Enirya had likely not intended to, but the impact had caused her finger on the trigger to move enough to fire a shot. It hit right next to Mikoto’s face.

Mikoto tried to get up, but then she stopped moving.

Enirya had been knocked over as well, but she was still pointing her handgun at Mikoto with a trembling hand.

“…You sure are stubborn. You had to have seen that snowplow attacking me if you came rushing over to stop it.”

“I can’t rule out the possibility that it is all an act. That thing is being remote controlled. You could be controlling it while running around.”

“I don’t really see what the point of that would be,” Mikoto said calmly despite her body still being frozen in place. “If I was truly putting on an act to draw suspicion away from me, don’t you think I would make it a little easier to understand? This doesn’t have the slightest thing to do with crimson long-legged army ants, so you might not even realize it was related.”

“…”

While Enirya glared at her, Mikoto slowly raised her hands and moved her body. She sat on the floor and pressed her back up against the metal shutter.

“The store workers certainly are staying cool despite this great disturbance. They must have some good counter measures against any damages.”

“…If you look at things internationally, your country’s service mentality is the odd one out. Once the customer buys something, the rest doesn’t matter. If a customer starts complaining and acting violently, they can just be kicked out, and once a customer takes a step outside the store, the workers have no need to deal with them. …The passageways are in the jurisdiction of us security guards, not the stores. Because of that, they have no need to deal with or resolve this. That’s the way they see it.”

“But we can’t just abandon the workers.”

“?”

Enirya frowned, but then noticed that Mikoto had unpleasant sweat appearing on her forehead.

Immediately afterwards, one of the metal shutters was torn apart from the inside and a new piece of construction equipment showed itself.

With the shutter and the shelves from the store pouring out ahead of it, construction equipment with a light machine gun and an explosive equipped appeared before Mikoto and Enirya.

And it appeared in the perfect spot to block the passageway.

“Wh-wha—!?”

“It just powered straight through the store. It has to be like a giant tunnel in there.”

Mikoto wiped the sweat from her face with the back of her hand and then heard an even more ominous sound.

With the sound of treads, another piece of construction equipment appeared from around the corner of the intersection between the two passageways. Now their escape was cut off by the two vehicles.

The enemy did not use any kind of roundabout way of killing them like shooting them with the light machine guns.

The enemy was instead making sure they died by setting both pieces of construction equipment to explode immediately.

The red lights in the driver’s seats turned green.

“…!!”

Mikoto immediately used magnetism to try to gather together the remains of the shutter.

But…

A dull noise rang out.

Something stabbed from the side into the vacant driver’s seat of the construction equipment in the intersection. It looked like a spear. It had four different blades on the end making it look like a human arm made of machinery.

Someone had thrown it from the side.

Just after Mikoto had that thought, a short girl jumped up onto the construction equipment and forcefully grabbed the handle of the spear.

“Lessar!?”

“Gwaahh! You idiot!! Don’t call out my name in front of the security guard!!” the girl practically snarled out as she adjusted her grip on the four-bladed spear and forcefully twisted her waist.

Something unthinkable happened.

The top half of the construction equipment made of thick steel panels was mercilessly torn off. The wreckage was like a carrot stuck on a fork. Lessar swung it around and it came free of the blades. It then flew away and rolled a few dozen meters.

Immediately afterwards, there was an explosion.

The explosive in the driver’s seat had been detonated.

“Did you come to save me?”

“One thing.” Lessar pointed behind Mikoto without responding to her question. “Isn’t that one about to explode, too?”

“!?”

Mikoto manipulated magnetism to forcibly move the metal plate in Enirya’s bulletproof vest. She was forced back as if she had been punched by an invisible arm and then she moved of her own free will further away from the snowplow.

Lessar practically caught Mikoto as the two of them made a quick turn around the corner of the passageway intersection.

Immediately afterwards, the second explosion occurred.

Amid the smoke and dust, Mikoto heard the sound of treads.

It seemed the enemy had plenty of vehicles under their control.

That was why they were not hesitating to blow up their own weapons.

“Dammit! There’s no end to them. At this rate, we’ll never make it to whoever is behind all this!!”

“Just playing around with these bombs will do nothing but wear us down,” said Lessar while resting the four-bladed spear on her shoulder. “But if we look at this in a different way, it could be a good opportunity.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those are basically radio-controlled toys. If you head for where the controlling radio signals are being sent from like we discussed before, you should be led straight to whoever is behind this. It doesn’t look like our enemy is going to let up on the attacks any time soon… You can do that with those psychic powers you’re so proud of, right?”

Lessar pulled a few good luck charm products in clear packages from her jacket pocket.

"(…Plant Set A, a Boar's Tooth Notebook, a Simple Rune Dyeing Kit, the separately sold Sticky Blood Color number three, and a Restorative Aroma—Magical Plant Effect Removal Sheet. Heh hehn. With these, I can probably combine a Seiðr with a battle-use auto-thinking assistance spell.)"

"Now then," Lessar muttered. "I'll have some fun here. You go head straight for where the signals are being sent from."

"You…"

"Oh, this has nothing to do with owing anyone anything. This is because they plowed straight into our store. We were investigating this too, so we were likely part of the target. This is just me getting back at them, so don't worry about it."

Mikoto then heard a slight click.

It was the noise of the hammer being brought up on the handgun held by the security guard named Enirya who had been tossed away magnetically.

"…Where do you think you're going, Misaka-san?"

"Isn't that obvious? I'm going to go find the bastard who started all this and kick his ass."

"That is not your job."

"It isn't her job to play around with you either," cut in Lessar. "Actually, I would very much like for you to protect the peace of this city. I won't stop you, Miss Security Guard. …Of course, that's only if you are able to get past the machine gun fire and find whoever is behind all this on your own."

Immediately after finishing what she was saying, Lessar moved adroitly to the side and charged into the smoke and dust.

There was no time to stop her.

As if in response, the repeated gunfire coming from a light machine gun rang out from multiple directions.

They did not know how many pieces of construction equipment there were in total, but things had begun to move. It was no time to be complaining amongst themselves. If they wanted to stop that disturbance, they had to defeat whoever was controlling those vehicles remotely as quickly as possible.

Mikoto turned her back on the direction Lessar had gone and ran off in the opposite direction.

Enirya seemed conflicted, but the machine gun fire forced her back preventing her from moving forward. And in the time that happened, Mikoto had already made it a fair distance from the threat of Enirya’s handgun.

Mikoto followed the controlling radio signal and headed in the direction of whoever was behind it all.

She headed down some stairs as she pushed on toward her goal.

Part 8

Once she knew what to do, it was simple.

Mikoto picked the locks of several doors and ran down long passageways.

The giant facility took up more space than 650 domed stadiums, but the construction equipment was attacking inside the building. The controlling radio signal had to be fairly strong in order to make its way through all the walls. For someone who could freely control electricity like Mikoto, it was like having the GPS function of a child’s cell phone on.

She knew what path she had to take, so all that was left was to follow it.

“…Over there, hm?”

She had come to a different area within the giant facility. She stood before a tenant-owned shop with its shutter closed. The powerful radio signal was being sent from within.

Mikoto ignored the usual theory of opening the door.

Instead, she manipulated magnetism to blow the metal shutter forward.

With an explosive noise, the entire giant wall was knocked into the store. Mikoto stepped inside through that entrance she had forcibly opened.

There were no lights on.

In the center of the dim store, a few LEDs blinked and light came from a small screen that seemed to be a PDA.

But that was it.

There was no sign of anyone inside.

And there was some kind of unpleasant smell.

"…"

Mikoto approached the wall and hit the light switch.

With a dry click, the store was filled with dazzling light from fluorescent lights.

The full picture became clear.

A lot of what looked like fish tanks were lined up along the wall. However, there was no water filling them and there were no tropical fish swimming within them. The fish tanks were filled about halfway up with black soil and a large number of small black insects were on top of that.

On the opposite wall, more fish tanks were lined up, but they had lots of mice instead of ants. They may have been food for the ants.

As expected, the PDA in the center of the room was connected to radio devices. There was also a small but high output antenna. That was likely where the snowplows had been controlled from.

And…

It had all been thoroughly destroyed.

The glass of the fish tanks had been smashed and some of the black soil had spilled out. The store stank of insecticide. The black ants were not moving. Only the mice that had been raised to be food were still alive. They were huddled together and cautiously watching Mikoto.

The radio equipment was just barely in a usable condition, but the PDA's screen was displaying an error. Most likely, the construction equipment was no longer moving.

"This is…?"

The walls, the floor, and even the ceiling were covered in an unpleasant smelling liquid. It was not a normal amount. It was enough that it would not have been surprising if multiple people had been killed.

There was no one there.

But the lack of anyone there actually made Mikoto even more uneasy. The situation did not look like one where whoever it was had voluntarily run off.

(Who did this…?)

Mikoto headed further into the room.

There was a wooden box there that had 19 oranges inside.

Each one had been carefully smashed and the flesh of the fruit was sticking out. It looked as if someone had been checking to see if there were ants inside.

Mikoto had the same thought once more.

(Who did this…?)

Part 9

At 9:00 AM, the shopping mall truly opened for the day and a great number of tourists were swallowed up by the large facility.

The locations of all 20 oranges had been discovered and the incident related to the very valuable orange seemed to have ended with no victims for the time being.

Mikoto entered a delivery passageway for employees without permission while preventing the security guards from seeing her like usual.

(…This has gone well beyond just a demonstration.)

The living bombs had been dealt with, but Mikoto still had not regained her freedom. Enirya and the other security guards were likely still searching for her. The criminal breeding the crimson long-legged army ants had disappeared, so Mikoto was still unable to resolve the misunderstanding the security guards had made.

Also, there were still aspects of the incident that bothered Mikoto.

Who had attacked whoever was behind the incident in the short time between the construction equipment attacking and Mikoto making it to the tenant-owned shop?

And who exactly was it that was behind the incident?

"…"

The problem was that the construction equipment had been unmanned.

That meant that they did not create an alibi for anyone.

It could have even been someone right next to Mikoto.

Yes, if she was going to go simply with possibilities, she could not deny that one.

For instance, Lessar and the others could have been the ones controlling that construction equipment.

Mikoto had charged into that store where the radio signal had come from. The construction equipment had definitely been controlled from there. However, she could not say with certainty who could have done it. It may have been difficult for Lessar to have done it, but it was possible that the other workers at her store, Lancis and Bayloupe, had been controlling the vehicles.

Mikoto had gotten too deeply involved with that occult convenience store and therefore with Lessar and the others. It was possible that they were putting together some kind of plan and their connection with Mikoto was in the way. In that case, it was possible they had rather forcibly covered their tracks by destroying the occult convenience store.

But at the same time, other people were just as suspicious. For example, the security guards. They could have been feigning their troubles with the construction equipment while one of their comrades controlled the vehicles in order to trick Mikoto.

On the other hand, Mikoto could not think of a reason that they would go to that much effort to manipulate her actions. If Mikoto was simply in the way, she felt they could have just prepared a bomb in that tenant-owned store. Who gained anything by making Mikoto alone believe that whoever was behind the incident had been in that store and that they had been disposed of and taken away by someone else? She could understand if someone was manipulating how the security guards saw the situation, but what did someone gain from making Mikoto alone think that?

Had whoever was behind the incident truly been there and had truly been taken away?

Or had it just been made to look like that and whoever was behind the incident had not been taken from there?

She had no way of knowing.

However, there was one thing she could say for sure.

Whether whoever was behind the incident had been taken away there or it had merely been made to look that way, she did not know the full story behind that incident.

There was something more sleeping deeper beneath the surface.

And if it was not over, it was possible that the incident would once more bare its fangs toward the people enjoying themselves shopping within the shopping mall.

If that were the case…

“Really…” muttered Mikoto while lightly shaking her sleep-deprived head. “It looks like it isn’t just Academy City that won’t leave me bored.”

Chapter 4

Part 1

Enirya G. Algonskaya stood unhappily in front of a small tenant-owned store inside the large commerce facility.

The metal shutter had been destroyed.

The space must have only been rented. It did not look as if it was being used for any proper business. The metal shelves had a few large fish tanks on them and the tanks that were filled with dirt had a large number of dead ants scattered about in them.

The room smelled of insecticide, but an even more powerful stench was also there.

It was not iron.

It was blood.

"There is no official record, so someone most likely broke into an empty store and used it," said one of her colleagues who was wrapped in bandages and searching on the Semipublic AR. "I sent images of them to a specialist and it seems the dead ants are definitely crimson long-legged army ants. Do you think this was something like a weapon manufacturing plant?"

"…"

"With the oranges here too, this matches up with the suspect's testimony. Even the number of oranges matches up."

"But we still cannot deny the possibility that she set all this up herself."

"We found remains of what seems to be remote control equipment inside and some of us were rescued from the snowplow equipment by the suspect and the girl who seems to be an acquaintance of hers.”

“Even so.” Enirya’s expression did not change as she arbitrarily listed off the various possibilities that came to her mind. “Let’s just assume the machinery here had the specs needed to control the snowplow equipment. However, we cannot deny the possibility that the machinery here was being controlled remotely by different machinery in a different location. Misaka Mikoto could have used the snowplow equipment to hold us up while she attacked this place and ran off with the people and objects she did not want us to see.”

Enirya used her chin to point toward the stains inside the store.

“Is that from a human?”

“Most likely. We’re currently comparing it to the Russian authorities’ database… but given the amount, it looks like this was a murder with no corpse.”

“Blood for a blood transfusion could have been repeatedly taken from a single person over a period of time and then scattered about all at once here. It’s premature to assume there’s a corpse just because of the amount of blood.”

Despite saying that, Enirya felt it was more likely to have been an actual murder than some kind of act.

But…

“If this was a real murder, where is it hidden?”

“Yes, a body is rather large.”

“This shopping mall is a collection of manmade things. No matter where you go, the surveillance equipment is active and there are few places where something could be buried. After all, almost everything, including the ground, has been turned into a monitor for the Semipublic AR. The only places with dirt are the spaces for the trees along the pathways, but those are pretty much just large flowerpots.”

“Let’s assume it was incinerated or disposed of with chemicals.”

“Even with those methods, it would take quite a bit of time to make sure not even pieces of the bones remained. If someone took that much time, I would think their preparations and work would show up on the surveillance equipment."

But even so there were only blood stains there and no sign of a body.

"…Don't you think this workload exceeds what could be done by an individual?"

"But it looked like the suspect was fighting alongside someone else against the heavy equipment…"

(That's not what I meant.)

While muttering that internally, Enirya looked up at the passageway's ceiling.

To carry away and dispose of a body while slipping past the eyes of others and the cameras in that city would take quite a few people. But if there had been a large number of people in the vicinity of the scene, the surveillance equipment would likely have caught it.

(Dealing with a suspect who can manipulate electricity is tricky. I hadn't thought of it before, but she might be able to interfere with the surveillance equipment.)

But she also made sure to think about possibilities that did not involve such mysterious things.

(So someone interfered with the surveillance equipment to hide a group, hm?)

Her job was to investigate and find every single one of those suspects.

She had to continue her investigation of Misaka Mikoto while making sure to look at all the possibilities before her eyes.

(But who could do that? If it has nothing to do with those mysterious psychic powers, then who could do that?)

Part 2

Mikoto decided to take a short break.

That had been her intention when she leaned up against the wall, but she ended up sleeping for over 5 hours straight. Her body had already not been at 100% due to jetlag and then she had been forced to run around all night due to the incident. Her weariness had been well beyond normal. There was also the fact that she had felt relieved that there was no longer a definite time limit on the living bombs that used oranges.

However, it had still been careless of her.

Her punishment for that carelessness was a close up shot of Lessar’s face when she woke up.

“Dwahh!?”

“C’mon, that’s a hurtful reaction to have, y’know? But I’m surprised you could sleep with all this security around. What were you going to do if a security guard ran across you? Even though the living bombs were stopped, the tourists still found out about the attack by the snowplows. Everyone’s talking about it.”

“Huh? I-I was asleep!? I…huh!?”

“…At least you’re doing an excellent job at being comically half asleep,” Lessar said while holding out a paper bag to an international fast food restaurant. “From the way you’re acting, I’m betting you didn’t have time to get anything to eat, either.”

“Thanks…but I’m not sure I want something this juicy right after waking up.”

“How about I coax you into eating it with a concept the Japanese seem to love. Heh, this is what everyone eats in the West.”

"…I'm not going to just do what everyone else does and become overweight. There are people in the West who get so they can't even get out their door and have to call in the fire department, right?"

As she spoke, Mikoto dug through the paper bag. She avoided the heavy main foods like the hamburger, the greasy nuggets, and the thick sausage and instead chose the lighter things like the salad and the French fries. The heavy meat dishes ended up in Lessar's small stomach.

Mikoto looked at Lessar's chest.

"(…Is this difference in our appetites what decides the winner?)"

"…If you're interested, you can massage them a bit. Just don't treat them too roughly."

(I can't stand how confident she is!!)

Mikoto turned her anger on the French fries and started eating through them violently.

"But…"

"What?"

"…You came back to me."

"?"

Lessar looked confused.

Mikoto had thought of Lessar and the others from the occult convenience store as possible suspects for whoever had attacked with the snowplows. She had thought they might have destroyed the occult convenience store like that in order to destroy their point of contact with Mikoto who was getting too involved in some plan they were putting together.

But even after the destruction of the store, Lessar had come and contacted her. That theory no longer held any meaning.

Had Mikoto just been over thinking things?

“What time is it?”

“It’s already noon.”

“…I didn’t intend to sleep that long and my head still feels heavy.”

“Of course it does. Look where you were sleeping. That’s the first time I’ve actually seen someone sleeping while standing up.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose.” Mikoto let out a slight yawn as she spoke. “But you didn’t know I was here, right? You had to have run all over the place in order to search for me.”

“I just felt I had left things unfinished with you.” Lessar shrugged. “If you just disappeared and I didn’t hear anything about you, I would have been worried. But you certainly finished things in a showy way. Just because the person behind this set you up, you shouldn’t make them disappear leaving a bunch of blood behind. Isn’t that taking things too far?”

“…Hm?” Mikoto frowned.

She felt like there was a gap between how she and Lessar saw the situation.

“Wait a second. What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean? By the time I caught a peek of the store you attacked, it was all over. It looked like an abandoned store where some kind of tragedy had occurred to me. You did that, right?”

“Ah…eh!? N-no!! It was already like that when I got there!! I didn’t snap and go on a rampage!!”

“Hehh. So splitting up like that does create a discrepancy in information. How about we go over all the information we have to make sure it’s all in order?”

“We would need somewhere where we could speak safely to do that. I’m still being pursued by the security guards after all. It’s actually strange that I wasn’t found while sleeping here.”

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

Lessar winked and pointed toward the entrance to a delivery entrance.

“I know a good place.”

Part 3

“Welcome to Nihon Daruma’s North Gate store.”

Mikoto was dumbfounded upon hearing Bayloupe say that in an utterly halfhearted way.

Her mouth flapped open and closed as she looked back and forth between Lessar at her side and Bayloupe behind the register counter.

“What? What is going on? Wasn’t the occult convenience store blown away by that construction equipment…?”

“Didn’t you hear her say this is the north gate store? It’s a different one. Didn’t you notice that we headed in a completely different direction? Or are you still half asleep?”

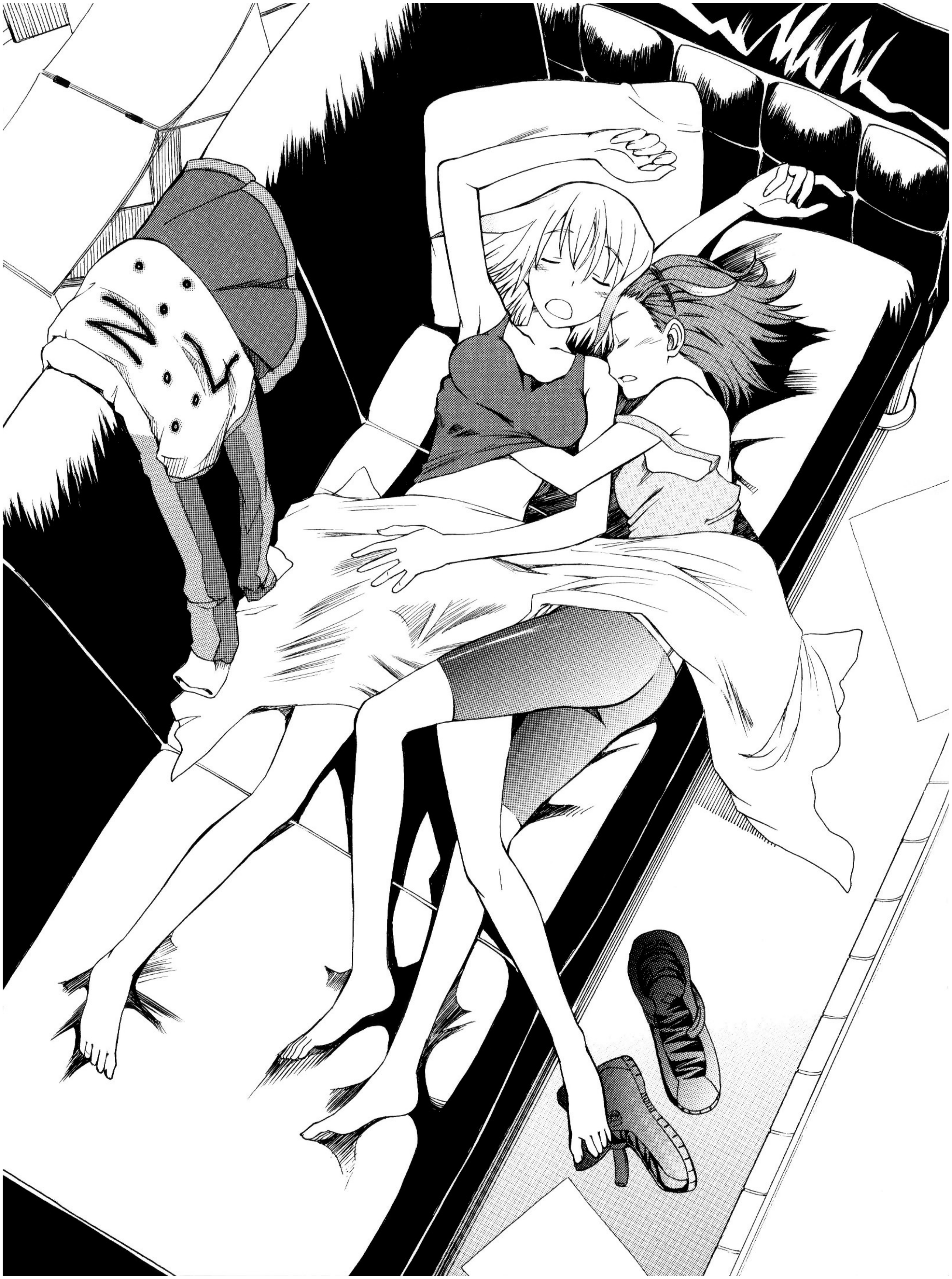
“…I see. It’s a convenience store, so it’s a chain…”

Mikoto had found it strange that a single store as suspicious as that existed, but it seemed the hidden parts of the planet were a bit bigger than she had thought.

As before, the shelves were covered with strange things such as dried bats and bagged crystals. As Mikoto looked around at it all, Lessar opened her mouth to speak.

“Let’s talk in the back. We have a backroom for the staff.”

“Oh, the place you take pickpockets.”



“Some people call it a break room.”

As Lessar continued muttering, she led Mikoto through the door behind the register counter and into a room beyond.

Two girls were intertwined together sleeping on a couch.

“Bh!?”

“Floris! Lancis!! Quit awakening strange new tendencies and wake up! We need to use this room!!”

“Wait…um…aren’t we being a little too intrusive here...?”

“Don’t draw back!! It’s fine. They’re normal! Lancis just has a bad habit of climbing into others’ beds when she gets sleepy!!”

Lessar struck the two girls’ heads and they opened their eyes looking annoyed. Mikoto had met the forehead girl named Lancis before, but it was the first time she had met the girl named Floris. She was a white girl with bright, almost whitish blonde hair that reached down to her shoulders.

Floris listlessly rubbed at her eyes while looking at Mikoto.

“Nn. Are you that middle school girl that Lessar got wrapped up in some strange stuff?”

“Y-yes, I suppose.”

“Sorry about that.”

After saying that, Floris peeled Lancis off of her who was still sleepily clinging to her. She then grabbed the other girl by the nape of the neck and left the backroom.

“Okay, just sit down wherever. I’ll go get some tea.”

“…I don’t really want to sit down here. It isn’t going to be all sticky, is it?”

Mikoto was cautious, but the incidents from some alternate dimension did not end there. The color and smell of the tea Lessar brought was clearly from the realm of the absurd and the snacks to go with the tea were some unknown objects that looked like black dried squid chopped up into the shape of sheets.

Mikoto grabbed one of the dried snacks between her thumb and forefinger.

“What is this?”

“Bat.”

“…”

She had been given an odd sort of warning. The other girl might have actually been a bit angry.

“Okay, how about I start by telling you about us?”

“About when you were fighting the construction equipment?”

“No, not that.” Lessar took a sip of the strange tea. “I will start with why we opened this convenience store and slipped into this city.”

“?”

“We...um, how should I put it? ...Our methods are different from yours.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“We are a group that uses unique powers by controlling the self in religious, occult, and mental ways. While you use quantum theory to bring the mental out to the physical world, we use a different system to do the same.”

“Hmm,” Mikoto nodded. “So you use methods from a time when there was no distinction between occult and scientific abilities. …Things like witch’s potions may actually be a useful as a way of using natural resources like medicinal herbs and poisonous insects.”

“…Ah, dammit. Even after I tell you that much, you still interpret it that way? Fine. I’ve lost all interest in explaining this properly to you.” Lessar placed her teacup on top of the saucer. “Anyway, we opened this convenience store here in order to investigate a certain plan being carried out in the city.”

“You mean Code EIC?”

“No, it’s something beyond that.” Lessar shook her head. “Code EIC is a system that allows one to raise or lower the value of a chosen product by freely spreading whatever rumor one wants at the desired level by controlling all kinds of media from the mass media to the local media. However, the ones being tricked are not aware of it. You could say it uses group psychology to interfere with people’s minds at a rather deep level.”

“And?”

“As someone who deals with the development of psychic powers on an everyday basis, you should know.” Lessar started eating one of the bat snacks. “Interfering with someone’s mind at a deep level has the possibility of drawing out the possibilities that sleep deep within them. …For instance, it could draw out possibilities at the level of overcoming the laws of physics.”

“You don’t mean…” Mikoto noticed her throat was dry and reflexively reached for the cup, but she stopped herself. “Are you trying to say the rumors spreading through this city could cause people to suddenly be able to use psychic powers?”

“(…Well, we theorize that it is not scientific powers that will appear. It is a magical method of refining people’s life force into magic power and creating a collective mental union by using the animal magnetism related to mesmerism.)”

Mikoto could not quite hear what Lessar was muttering.

“We did not know if Code EIC was just a coincidence or if it was an intentional project. In fact, we did not even know for sure if it even had the ability to control anything more than the values of products with its rumors. That is what we were investigating. But…”

“But?”

“We have not gotten any good results. And then the whole orange incident cropped up.” Lessar wiped her mouth with a handkerchief. “That incident imitating the urban legend was different from what we were thinking of. It was a case of the bizarre phenomenon being created using normal methods.”

“But that did not have anything to do with what Code EIC was originally meant to do, right? That was a third party pretending to be the higher ups and interfering with Code EIC.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“…What do you mean by that?”

Mikoto frowned.

Lessar pointed both her palms in Mikoto’s direction.

“I’m not doubting what you said happened. Most likely, there really was a third party in that tenant-owned shop creating living bombs by implanting crimson long-legged army ants in oranges. Let’s just set aside for now that fact that whoever it was ended up going missing at someone else’s hands.”

“So that third party was the person misusing Code EIC and causing all the problems, right?”

“But,” Lessar said as if cutting her off, “even if this third party was the person behind the living bombs, can we really deny the possibility that some other person was the one using Code EIC to spread the urban legend about the very valuable orange?”

There was a short silence in that backroom.

Lessar gave a thin, almost challenging smile.

Mikoto thought for a bit sorting through the information in her own head before slowly opening her mouth.

“So in the end…”

“What?”

“Who exactly was it that actually set up those living bombs?”

“I dunno. Frankly, we missed out on figuring that out. Since someone else completely disposed of whoever it was, we do not know the person’s name or what they looked like. Since they did not give the option of resolving things with money, they may have just been someone who had a grudge against the shopping mall.”

“…So someone used Code EIC to spread the urban legend of the very valuable orange for some unknown reason.”

“That security guard named Enirya said that urban legend began spreading on the day I came here, but Setali said she saw it on the internet a few days before that.”

“Maybe it had stages. It could have started as a cactus and the direction was gradually adjusted. It’s normal to only vaguely remember rumors, so people would still think they had heard of it before even after it changes. It may have just been that someone who wanted to get back at the city for something may have heard that story somewhere in the city. And so…”

“They chose to make it a reality. I’d like to know how this person managed to get their hands on crimson long-legged army ants, but it’s possible they just happened to be a major insect enthusiast or those ants may be sold somewhere in this shopping mall. Since there was almost no time between when the person would have heard the story and when they carried out the attack, they might have already been preparing to carry out some kind of terrorist attack.”

Since they did not have the person there, they would never get any real answers no matter how much they speculated.

And the past criminal was not the most important thing to think about.

What was most important was the situation that was still developing.

“…So that would mean the person who used Code EIC to spread the urban legend of the very valuable orange was not damaged by any of this.”

“Yes, they did make the person behind the oranges completely disappear. It seems getting in the way by imitating their plan made them rather angry. …Hmm, having people disappear in an amusement park or a shopping mall is going along with urban legends too, isn’t it? Don’t they talk about there being some kind of anti-human trafficking organization manual or lovers disappearing after entering a changing room?”

“So they made the person behind the oranges vanish and they have a plan. …But who are they? And what are they trying to do?”

“Who is it that has the authority to control Code EIC?”

“The higher ups of the city...” Mikoto started to say, but she shook her head. “But wait. Setali said there weren’t any higher ups that were obviously pulling the strings behind everything. I don’t think she would lie in the situation she was in.”

“It might just be that a subordinate like Setali does not have the authority to even have any contact with the true depths of the city. Just because she works here doesn’t mean she knows everything about the shopping mall. It’s highly likely that the security guards pursuing you see you as the enemy while remaining completely unaware what their own superiors are doing. And Code EIC can slowly decide on the direction the giant flow of a financial market takes by bringing together small things such as rumors and alterations in the values of products.”

Mikoto recalled the security guard named Enirya who had said Mikoto was a suspect during the initial incident.

If Lessar was correct, Mikoto felt a bit sorry for Enirya.

“Let’s assume the higher ups of this city are the ones spreading the urban legends.” Mikoto frantically pulled together all the information in her head. “In that case, why are they doing it? They of course can’t be spreading these horrible stories for no reason. Do you have an idea what they’re after?”

“No. At first I thought they were using Code EIC to research people having their mentality rapidly changed artificially by group psychology. I was disappointed when that didn’t seem to be it. I just know that they aren’t using Code EIC just to use Code EIC. As you said, it’s probably in preparation for some larger plan.”

The actions of whoever was behind it all made it clear whether that plan was a dangerous one or not. No matter what they had done, the person who had used the living bombs had still been a human. That human could very well be dead and it had solely been done because he or she had gotten in the way of this plan. The coldness of that method of dealing with the problem showed that the people behind it all were up to no good. It was not too hard to sense a dangerous atmosphere coming from some plan thought up by people like that.

“If only we had some kind of hint as to what they were doing and where…”

“But don’t we have one?”

Mikoto was taken aback by Lessar’s immediate reply.

“What do you mean?”

“Why did the higher ups behind this eliminate the person behind the oranges?”

“Well…he was getting in the way of their plan…”

“They are at the top of this city. That position allows them to freely send out the security guards. If they just wanted to stop this person from going out of control, they could have just had the security guards deal with him. After all, they could just say a terrorist was shot during an official operation. I can’t think of any reason they would have to hide it. …However, they instead went to quite a bit of effort to make this person completely disappear. I doubt they would have wanted to do that if they didn’t have to.”

“So there was a reason to make this person disappear rather than to kill him?”

“Yes.”

“Why would they want such an incomplete resolution?”

“Because there is a dispute.”

Before Mikoto could ask what about, Lessar gave the answer.

“A dispute between Academy City and the cooperative institution that is the shopping mall.”

That time, Mikoto fell completely silent.

She had never even come close to thinking of that possibility.

“Think about the composition of this incident. The exact same urban legend was spread within Academy City and a cooperative institution. An incident occurred based on that rumor. The only possible culprit is the Level 5 who went from one city to the other. …It's quite the false accusation, isn't it? I seems like someone was trying to start some trouble to me."

"…But which side?" Mikoto muttered in a trembling voice. "Which side wants this conflict?"

"We were discussing a plan on the shopping mall's part just now, right?" Lessar said giving a simple answer. "Spreading the same rumor in both Academy City and here was the shopping mall's plan, right? And just reading that paper on Code EIC makes it clear whether it would be possible or not. As we said before, a third party sensed that setting and used it for his or her own terrorism. We know next to nothing about that third party other than that they likely had a grudge against the shopping mall. However," Lessar added, "the living bombs incident was completely unrelated to the initial plan, so it tells us nothing about what specific rumor was meant to be spread and whether the incident was to occur here or in Academy City. It may have originally been set as a completely different incident and the method could have been in the reverse."

"The reverse…? You mean…?"

"I mean that they intended to cause an incident in Academy City after spreading the same rumor in both places."

"!?"

"Code EIC is a system to rewrite the values of products by purposefully spreading rumors using all forms of media both mass and local. But it is possible that its effects could be spread beyond the shopping mall in the form of 'foreign news' making its way into Academy City."

"To do that, they would need to first spread the urban legend within the shopping mall and then have it sent to Academy City as news about what is popular here."

"For the orange story, it seems information from Academy City was gathered, was spread through the shopping mall to have its details adjusted to be easier to use, and was then sent back. …Not messing with that and just carrying out a terrorist attack really would have been faster. Well, spreading the urban legend made sure there were a lot more people who knew about the story which would bring the number of suspects way up. I suppose that would draw suspicion away from the actual culprit.”

If they were spreading an urban legend in both cities and causing an incident according to that rumor, then they could do it in the other direction.

“I said before that if the higher ups of the shopping mall were guilty, they would be attacking their own city. Doing that would make no sense, so I don’t think they would. If they just want to cause trouble between the two cities, it makes more sense to attack the other city.”

If that was true, then the higher ups of the shopping mall would be truly beginning their attack on Academy City now that they had gotten their plan back on course.

“But why?” Mikoto asked. “This shopping mall is one of Academy City’s cooperative institutions. They have managed to advance this far thanks to our technological assistance. Conflict will only make them lose that benefit. Why would they cause a fight that does not get them anything?”

“Maybe they want out of that relationship.” Lessar responded smoothly as if she had already expected that question. “A cooperative institution cannot receive greater benefit than Academy City does no matter what. It isn’t too surprising to think they might feel dissatisfied about that. Having a technological gap of 20 or 30 years will create some friction. The shopping mall probably wants this conflict because they want to lessen that technological gap.” Lessar sighed just a bit. “If Academy City were to disappear, the fragments of scientific knowledge the cooperative institutions have would become the most valuable things in the world. That holds true whether that information is related to machines or psychic powers.”

“That’s why they’re trying to cause some kind of large scale terrorist attack…?” Mikoto shook her head. “But that wouldn’t get them anything!! Destroying Academy City in order to lessen that gap will only send the scientific level of the world plummeting down! And Academy City is the only place that can actually develop psychic powers. The technology in this shopping mall is not enough to pull it off. Without Academy City, the field of psychic powers development would be utterly destroyed!!”

“They don’t care about that,” Lessar responded immediately. “They don’t care if psychic powers disappear forever. If they can use that fragmentary scientific knowledge to advance the research in the wrong direction and manage to open up a completely new field, that’s enough. A lot of technology exists to support the development of psychic powers. If all they want is a profit, extending from that field is the most efficient method.”

“They just want profit…?”

“Well, it’s true that there are a lot of possibilities opened up by developing psychic powers, but you just need to remember that they will not necessarily pay any heed to that.”

“They’re establishing a business model,” Mikoto muttered as if she were carving the words into her own brain. “Does this shopping mall have research facilities like Academy City?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thoroughly looked over the place, so I can’t say. I just know that the place seems to be focused on thought experiments in the fields of finances and economics.” Lessar shrugged. “However, if Academy City were to receive catastrophic damage, the quality of ‘cutting edge technology’ would fall quite a bit all across the world. I’m sure the businesses and research organizations that want to benefit as much as possible would rely on the fragmentary knowledge held by Academy City’s cooperative institutions like the shopping mall. Even if the shopping mall did nothing more than set a way of charging quite a bit of money for the use of that information and a way to make a profit off of the sale of all products derived from that information, they would make quite a bit of profit. In fact, their profit would be greater than anyone else could keep up with.”

A world where the leading edge of science had been shaken.

That was what a world where Academy City had been destroyed would be.

The shopping mall understood what kind of distortion that would be, but they were after nothing more than profit.

“This shopping mall has its strengths in financial and economical areas. They have the data from all the experiments they have run, so they likely have the strength needed to survive the chaos that would occur if Academy City were to cease functioning. And at the same time the other cooperative institutions would be taking much more damage. With that, it is possible they could end up repainting the very structure of the scientific market.”

If that happened, it was not unlikely that Academy City would not be reconstructed.

What the companies and organizations around the world wanted was stability.

If another center appeared, they would have no problem moving there. If a situation were created where it would be more efficient to move to a new system rather than expending quite a bit of money to rebuild Academy City, no one would need Academy City anymore.

“Then…”

“The very valuable orange story was already used up by someone else, so they will be spreading a new urban legend between the two cities in order to carry out the next incident. After that, they will begin carrying out their large scale terrorist attack in order to destroy Academy City.”

“…”

“As I said before, spreading the urban legend between the two cities may have the effect of causing false accusations that will cause trouble and to hide who the true culprit is among a great number of suspects. However, it also may make a jumbled mess where it is unclear who was damaged by the incident and who gained from it. …And whatever is being planned, as long as it creates a situation where Academy City is catastrophically damaged, Academy City will be unable to carry out a detailed investigation. In that case, it is possible the shopping mall and the other cooperative institutions who have an interest in the scientific information may write up a report on the incident that gives a result convenient to themselves.”

Mikoto pulled out her cell phone and looked at the screen.

She was on the run, so merely using her cell phone was dangerous, but it was unclear if she would make it back in time even if she headed back for Academy City right that instant. In that case, she had no choice but to ask someone in Academy City to help resolve the incident.

She would need to contact a certain person who protected the peace of that city.

She would need to contact Shirai Kuroko of Judgment.

(They have prepared an urban legend in preparation for the incident. In that case, we may be able to predict what type of incident will happen next.)

“Do we know anything about what kind of rumor it is?”

“There is an unnatural surge within the shopping mall. It is most likely being artificially spread. I don’t know if it is in Academy City as well, but if my guess is right, it is also being spread there by some means. It is likely related to the next incident.”

“What kind of urban legend is it?”

“At the very least, it is more shocking than the orange one.” With a devilish grin on her face, Lessar spoke of the new rumor permeating the city. “The necklace of death. You may have heard of it. It is a rather famous story that involves uranium.”

Chapter 5

Part 1

There is a certain story.

There were two girls who were good friends. Girl 1 got a boyfriend. As a present, the boyfriend gave Girl 1 a necklace that had a very lovely stone in it.

Girl 1 was overjoyed by the present and wore it at all times.

But odd things started happening to her from that time on. Her face turned sickly, her health deteriorated, she was unable to fall asleep, and finally her hair started coming out. Girl 1 should have been happy with that necklace she loved so much, but instead she was cursed with bad luck. It was not much longer before she died.

Girl 2 inherited the necklace when Girl 1 died. According to an acquaintance of hers, the stone in the necklace was a uranium crystal. The details were unknown, but Girl 1's boyfriend had given her a uranium crystal as a present. Girl 1 had been killed by the radiation.

"…Wow. That story's in horrible taste as usual," said Saten Ruiko, a girl who loved rumors.

She had been looking through a website dealing with urban legends. She had been chasing after the rumor of the Level Upper that sounded like a lie, but she still wished it was true. She had come to a dead end in her search and after a few twists and turns had finally ended up reading that completely unrelated urban legend.

Urban legend websites generally had two objectives.

The first was to gather together and introduce urban legends that were either circulating or had been circulating in the past. However, most people seemed to think that was not enough to warrant the site’s existence. Generally, those sites were only seen as proper sites if they also gave their own commentary or explained whether it could actually happen.

Most of the time, the opinions on the urban legends said they could not actually happen.

(They start by making you think it could actually happen, but then they search out all sorts of things denying its possibility and say it all with such a sense of superiority. It feels like they have their priorities backwards to me.)

However, she did at times understand the feeling of wanting to crush an urban legend because it was impossible if you thought about it scientifically. Urban legends could be incredibly creepy to the point of not being able to relax until you were able to utterly prove them wrong.

The story of the necklace of death had the following piece of additional commentary with it:

A crystal small enough to fit on a necklace would not have enough radiation to kill someone in such a short period of time. As such, the dramatic change shown in this story would not actually occur.

This urban legend has spread quite a bit in the past as well, but it seems to have been coming back recently. We are currently investigating what has caused this revival, but we can say that this is a very common pattern.

“…This may be an urban legend, but I prefer the more enjoyable kinds that have more dreams in them,” Saten muttered as she closed the browser window.

She had not been able to find the Level Upper that day either.

When she eventually found it, Saten intended to brag about it to Uiharu.

Part 2

“Yes, yes!! I checked, and it’s become a rather popular story especially on the internet! But that story really is in bad taste!!” Shirai Kuroko yelled into her cell phone as she rushed out of her dorm.

It was past curfew, but she could enter and exit fairly easily by teleporting. Also, it was hardly the time to worry about the curfew.

“Do you think Anti-Skill will do anything?” said Misaka Mikoto’s voice from the cell phone.

“With only this much information, I doubt it. And if I tell them, they would likely prevent me from taking action.” Shirai went over the information again in her head. “Essentially, Uiharu and I are the only ones that can take action.”

“Uiharu?”

“Oh, I guess you wouldn’t know her, onee-sama. She’s a colleague of mine. She’s the kind of Judgment member that mainly spends her time in front of a computer.”

“…That’s not much help.”

“Onee-sama, that kind of assessment is more than a little bit hurtful.”

“Anyway, it seems what I explained to you really is going to happen. I think the enemy is planning to use the urban legend of the necklace of death to carry out some kind of terrorist attack on Academy City.”

“I see. To be honest, this just does not feel real to me, but I will trust you, onee-sama.” Shirai frowned a bit. “But it feels like we need to tell that cooperative shopping mall to not get carried away. I can’t believe they would suspect you.”

“I’ve had about enough of it myself. But I’m being sheltered by some strange occult convenience store, so I’m managing for now.”

“Occult?”

“Well, here I’m having trouble for a different reason with the weird people like Lessar and Lancis.”

“…O-onee-sama! My bad feeling antenna is up to three bars! There isn’t someone other than me at your side, is there!?”

“Umm, there is. She’s really annoying, so she’s more or less the same as you. Anyway, you know what you have to do, right?”

“I have to go out and make sure there aren’t any suspicious necklaces showing up anywhere.”

“It doesn’t have to be a necklace,” said Mikoto cutting in. “Basically, it just has to be an incident that appears to be the same. It doesn’t even have to use any radioactive materials. Now that the urban legend has been spread in preparation, they could take action at any time.”

Whether electromagnetic waves were visible light, microwaves, or whatever else was determined by the wavelength. If they could produce electromagnetic waves with extremely high frequencies, they could produce the same results as the necklace of death.

“But would they even be able to get a team into Academy City with how heavily guarded it is?”

“I doubt it’s impossible,” Mikoto responded after thinking for a bit. “After all, I’m currently running around in a cooperative institution. …They have some kind of plan occurring right now.”

“…I first need a list of all the people from the shopping mall who are in the city after going through the proper procedures.”

Shirai hung up and called a different number.

She called Uiharu Kazari, the other Judgment member she had mentioned before.

“Have you finished the search!?”

“I’m still working on it. I know that 52 people from the shopping mall are here in Academy City. I have found a list of where they are staying, but 5 of them are listed as private, so I can’t locate them.”

“Private?”

“It isn’t too surprising. They are participants in a forum in the international conference hall in District 3. They’re being treated as VIPs, so their locations are probably being kept a secret as a means of preventing any terrorist attacks on them.”

“…Hm.” Shirai thought for a bit. “Uiharu. If someone was going to carry out a large scale terrorist attack that would utterly destroy all functions of the city, how many people do you think they would need?”

“I-I don’t know anything dangerous like that. Wait…what is going on? You told me to look that up, so I helped you, but is this some kind of dangerous situation?”

(…Well, I doubt they could do it with only 5 people.)

After that arbitrary conclusion, Shirai asked another question.

“How many groups of visitors are there?”

“Um…3 or 4. They’re things like staff for a cargo jet and dispatched groups of researchers…”

“Give me a list,” Shirai ordered. “If that’s all, it would likely be faster to just work without thinking too much about it.”

Part 3

Shirai Kuroko was a Level 4 Teleporter.

That meant that she could freely enter and exit most places as long as she paid attention to where any electromagnetic and ultrasonic sensors were.

Uiharu had sent a list to her cell phone that she was using to head to the hotel where one of the groups was staying at. She then entered one of the members' rooms.

She of course did not knock.

Nor did she use a card key.

Places like hotels would have cameras set up in the public areas such as the lobby, the lounge, the elevators, and the emergency stairways, but all the other places tended to have laxer security. For instance, the hallways and customer rooms had no cameras for the sake of privacy.

As such, no one could stop Shirai from teleporting in undetected.

She checked to see if she could hear anything on the other side of the door and then unhesitatingly entered the room.

"Now then…"

Shirai pulled thin gloves from her skirt's pocket and put them on as she looked around. As expected, no one was there. The lights were not on. Holding a penlight in her mouth, she checked the closet and the bedside table.

She heard Uiharu's voice coming from her small cell phone that was hooked to her ear like a headset.

“Shirai-san, please be careful. We don’t know what it is, but there could be something there with similar effects to the necklace of death.”

“If it was that easy, this would certainly go a lot faster.”

“How about you use the simple detection tool provided by Judgment? It’s the thing you can connect to the lower connector on your phone that acts as a sensor and puts together data on the composition of the air and whether there are harmful electromagnetic waves there.”

“Hm?”

“We all underwent training on how to use it the other day, remember!? Or does someone with top grades in a high class school have the ability to sleep through lessons, too!?”

As Uiharu squealed an explanation at her, Shirai followed the instructions and attached an unfamiliar device to her phone.

Shirai had a habit of walking around with items that she had been provided even if she did not know how to use them. The reason she did not put any effort into teaching herself how to use them was simple.

(If I teleport it, anything can be used as a weapon. There’s no point in trying to go for two birds with one stone.)

With that arbitrary thought, Shirai put the small cell phone back to her ear and looked around.

The only piece of luggage seemed to be a large suitcase.

It was locked, but that was no problem for Shirai.

By teleporting just the outer suitcase, she managed to get out the items inside.

Even if the person was a complete subordinate working odd jobs on the outer edges of the plan, someone in a group planning to carry out a terrorist attack would need to be prepared.

There were two major categories those preparations fell under.

The first was things like firearms and blades that reinforced one’s strength.

The second was things like fake passports and disguising wigs that hid oneself strengthening one’s safety.

Shirai fished through the luggage for a bit, but…

(…It looks like this was a miss.)

Shirai came to that conclusion as she was sending each object back into the suitcase with her teleportation. Not only did she not find the mysterious object in question, but she did not even find a single gun.

She hadn’t thought she would find the actual object so easily.

Shirai teleported out of the room and headed for the hotel where the next group was staying.

The misses continued.

But then, there were only 4 groups on the list.

She made it to the last one before long.

Shirai’s expectations had not been wrong.

“…”

The instant she teleported inside the room, something seemed off.

No one was inside.

There were no sensors or traps.

But there was something clearly different from the other hotels that had been misses. It was too clean. Of course, hotel rooms tended to be that way, but after staying there for an hour, the guest’s smell tended to cling to the place. Normally, slight traces would remain in the bed or the bathroom, but there was nothing there. It was like a model room.

There were no suitcases, coats, or any other objects belonging to the person staying there.

Shirai pulled out a few devices from her skirt’s pocket and checked the doorknob for fingerprints.

Nothing remained.

(I know you don’t leave any fingerprints behind if you wear gloves…)

Shirai came to her conclusion while touching the cell phone on her ear with a finger.

(…but cleaners enter the room every day. Since even their fingerprints are gone, the person staying her was not someone who just so happened to be wearing gloves. They had to have at least wiped off the doorknob.)

“Uiharu, I’ve got a hit here.”

“What should I do?”

“This was the group sent here from the Russian shopping mall for business training. Get me pictures of the 18 members, their identities, their schedule in Academy City, their current locations…and, well, just send me as much information on them as you can find.”

Part 4

Inside the 177th Judgment Branch, Uiharu Kazari continued working.

At first glance, she was a girl with no characteristics that stood out, but the large number of flower decorations on her head completely overturned that initial impression.

While using a computer, she spoke into the cell phone she had switched to speakerphone.

“I’ve done a cursory gathering of data, but it seems like tidy official information. It looks like it may be difficult to determine where they currently are.”

“You have images of all their faces though, right?”

“Well, yes.”

“Then go looking through the recorded footage from the security cameras and robots from around the hotel. If you go back, you should be able to find them. From there, just check through the footage from the different cameras along the way to follow their route to where they are now.”

“Should I really be doing that?”

“Yes, it’s fine.”

Shirai’s permission sounded rather arbitrary, but Uiharu still typed into the keyboard as instructed. Of course, what she was doing could not be done just with the authority of a normal member of Judgment.

(Now I don’t know who the real criminals are.)

“Found them. They used a classic technique.”

“?”

“In order to avoid being followed on the camera footage, they changed clothes or put on wigs at a few blind spots along the way. They were trying to prevent anyone from tracing them by altering their looks bit by bit.”

Normally, that method was used in a crowd to escape flesh-and-blood pursuers. With recorded footage that could be examined carefully again and again, someone who was constantly changing their clothes actually stood out from everyone else. It was basically announcing that they were up to no good.

“This isn’t even enough to fool facial recognition software,” Uiharu commented.

“You won’t be led astray by that, right?”

“They travelled using busses, the subway, taxis, and as many forms of transportation as they could manage. They split up to take multiple routes and occasionally double back or make large circles around the same place. Most likely, they are trying to throw off pursuers or are checking to see if they have any.”

Uiharu connected together the recorded camera footage, calculated out the path they had taken, and drew lines on a digital map.

“I’ve found it. I’ve found it. All the members that split up met back together at a single point.”

“Where?”

“An apartment complex for teachers in District 8. But almost no one is actually staying there. They are being rented by the wealthy as essentially ‘large closets’.”

Part 5

A Judgment armband was quite convenient.

Even if it was past time to be back at one’s dorm, the adults would overlook you as long as you walked around with a serious expression. Even if you stayed at a café for a long time or told a taxi driver to follow a certain car, others would go along with it.

However, there were times when that would not work.

For example…

(…Oh, dear. They have a manager’s room at the self-locking entrance and a guard patrolling around.)

Shirai walked around the apartment building as she checked on the situation. Those things seemed to have originally been to give one a feeling of safety knowing that the security there was strict, but that was what had made people look to that place for extra storage. Either way, it made things more difficult.

(Well, I can just teleport in.)

“Uiharu, do you know what room they are in? From the number of windows, there are 20 rooms on each floor. There are 20 floors, so there should be about 400 rooms.”

“There is a camera near the entrance, but the rest is rather difficult. Out of a sense of privacy, it’s only natural for there to be no cameras inside the apartment building.”

“…There are 18 of them. How did they all get in there?”

“Eh? What do you mean…? They just all entered through the entrance like normal.”

“…”

That building was an apartment building not a hotel. Basically, it rented out 2DKs. It was not a place 18 people would enter, so normally the manager would find it suspicious and try to stop them.

That meant…

(…The manager is in on it…?)

For an instant, an aggressive light filled Shirai’s eyes, but…

“No, no.”

“?”

“If the place truly is being used primarily for storage, groups of movers bringing in or taking out luggage wouldn’t be too rare.” Shirai looked up at the building and looked at the many windows lined up there. “Searching each and every one would be a pain. Is there no other way of figuring out where they are?”

“Sigh. As I told you, it would be difficult to pursue them using the camera footage.”

“But there are other ways, right?”

“Like?”

“How do you make a contract for one of the apartments? If they’re just being used for storage, the inspection must be fairly simple. If they’re the type where you can rent them out monthly over the internet, wouldn’t it be easy to check the records?”

“Umm…”

“And as for cameras, you don’t have to use the ones from the apartment building. You might be able to find a hint by using ones from other nearby buildings or even nearby ATMs or vending machines. Even if they value privacy here, cleaning robots will still come and go and…oh, I know. You can use the satellite to check for heat sources and figure out where the people inside are…"

"I think there may be an easier method," said Uiharu cutting her off. "Those apartments are being used for storage, so no one lives there. Won't you be able to tell by checking to see which window has light coming from it?"

"…"

Shirai cleared her throat after being given that elementary instruction.

She carefully looked up at the apartment building. None of the fluorescent lights seemed to be on, but there was a different paler light. It seemed to be from a flashlight.

It was on the third floor.

It was the 12th window from the right.

(That was incredibly easy…)

Shirai sighed and her body disappeared into thin air.

In the next instant, she arrived in the third floor passageway.

Once she had actually made it inside, she could immediately tell where her targets were. She heard a noise. It was the sound of someone trying to hide the sound of their breathing. Normally, she would not have noticed it. It was quiet enough that it would have blended into the usual background noise of an apartment building. However, even that small noise was audible as there was almost no one there due to the apartments being used for storage. It was about the same as hearing a mosquito flying near one's ear on a summer night.

As she approached the door, Shirai spoke into her cell phone.

"I'm going in. Uiharu, you keep an eye around the building. Check to see if anyone flees the building and if they do, make sure to track them."

"W-wait, Shirai-san. Will you be okay on your own?"

"…"

According to Mikoto, an incident involving living bombs that used crimson long-legged army ants had occurred in the Russian shopping mall right after the urban legend of the very valuable orange had spread throughout the area.

That incident had been carried out by a third party which had led to a lot happening, but the people truly behind it all were thinking of doing something similar.

In other words, now that the urban legend of the necklace of death had been spread through both Academy City and the shopping mall, they would be trying to carry out an incident related to that story in Academy City.

A group thinking of doing that truly existed.

In that case, necklaces would of course be the most suspicious, but it could also be harmful high frequency electromagnetic waves. Something invisible and therefore something there was no good way of taking counter measures against was scary, but…

(Well, I have this.)

Shirai lightly touched the cell phone at her ear that had the simple detection tool connected to it.

(They are likely finishing their preparations for bringing whatever it is in safely. Normally thinking, it should be in a lead package or something.)

Shirai Kuroko may have been able to come to that simple conclusion because she had no real sense of danger when it came to something she could not see.

"Here I go," Shirai said while pressing up against the wall next to the door.

That was when she felt that something was off.

Shirai had known where her target was from the moment she had entered that hallway. After all, that room had been the only one with sounds of people moving around inside it within that apartment building that was being almost completely used for storage.

If she could hear the noises they made, then they may have been able to hear the noises she made.

(Oh, no…)

A window made of frosted glass on the side of the entrance broke from the inside. Cracks spread all across the window, but the actual hole opened was rather small. A cylindrical object flew through that hole and rolled into the hallway Shirai was in.

The small cell phone on her ear gave off a sharp electronic tone.

The simple detection tool was giving a warning.

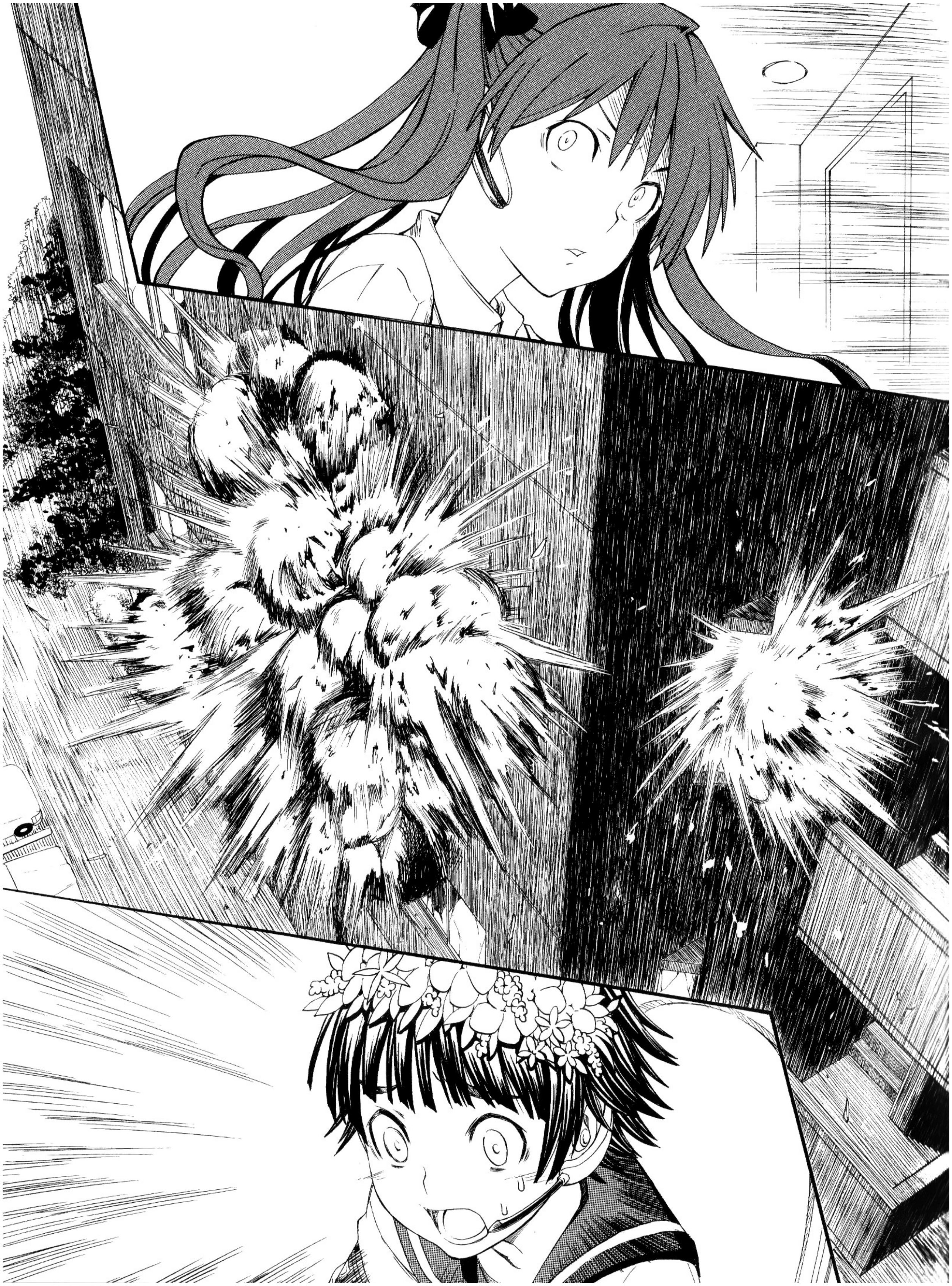
“Shirai-san! The tool has detected SC39!!”

“?”

“It’s a type of detector for harmful electromagnetic waves. With the proper amount, it changes color related to the presence, wavelength, and strength of electromagnetic waves.”

While listening to Uiharu’s explanation, Shirai remembered what it was herself.

She was pretty sure she had heard of it in a Judgment joint lesson.



“It was recalled quite some time ago because there was a danger of it catching fire or exploding when a large amount of the detector was bathed in strong electromagnetic waves with an extremely high frequency!!”

That was when Shirai noticed something giving off light in the broken window. It was not just a flashlight. The light was an ominous purple.

As it was frosted glass, she could not see the details, but whatever it was seemed to be attached to the end of some kind of pole.

A chill ran down her spine.

She accurately read what the enemy was intending to do.

She immediately teleported at about the same time as the ominous purple light took action.

Suddenly, a small scale explosion occurred in the building’s hallway.

Crimson flames lit up the walls and ceiling and a colorless shockwave spread to either end of the hallway in an instant. A few alarms started ringing, but no residents opened their doors to see what was going on. All the rooms truly seemed to be nothing more than storage areas. The manager or the guard would likely be there soon, but Shirai did not especially care.

A strange sweat was coming from Shirai Kuroko’s body as she stood in a spot a bit away.

She was almost in a panic.

She had not been injured by the explosion. The shockwave had struck her body, but it had been well within a safe level. Her eardrums and organs were likely undamaged.

That was not the problem.

Because Shirai knew how that explosion had been caused, she could not relax even though she was not in any pain.

She knew.

Just before the explosion, she had heard a noise like a camera flash.

And she had an idea what that had been.

The urban legend they were using was the necklace of death.

They had used the harmful electromagnetic wave detector SC39 to cause that explosion.

Which meant…

(…An ultra high frequency electromagnetic weapon!?)

“Wh-what was that just now, Shirai-san!? A strange line ran across the image from the satellite! I can’t scan in your area!!”

“Tch. It seems to be a relative of the microwave oven!!”

“P-please get out of there, Shirai-san!! You can’t do anything without protective clothing!!”

That was exactly what she intended to do.

She was also afraid of the explosions created using the harmful electromagnetic wave detector, but the greatest threat was the invisible radiation that could pierce straight through any obstacle.

But her opponents were faster.

She heard another sound from a room that should have been far away from where the room they were in. It was a very quiet electronic noise. Shirai felt she had only been able to hear it because her senses had been heightened due to her peril in addition to the lack of other noises.

(Don’t tell me they placed SC39 all over the place in case something unexpected happened!!)

Whether they had detected where she was or they were simply firing randomly, she would be taken out.

Their weapons used electromagnetic waves, so they could go straight through solid objects.

Wherever Shirai ran, there was no point if more of the detector was set up there already. If they just bathed the detector in the ultra high frequency electromagnetic waves, Shirai's body would be blown to pieces.

"…!!"

As such, Shirai escaped using a mental blind spot.

Instead of moving horizontally, she teleported down to the second floor.

Immediately afterwards, she heard the camera flash-like sound of the waves being fired. Following it came numerous explosions. If they assumed their target would only be able to move through the hallways, stairways, and elevators, she could wait them out there.

(The ultra high frequency electromagnetic waves that act as the trigger are more frightening than the explosive itself! A killer weapon that gives no pain is enough to make one quite uneasy! I need to get a detailed examination done after this is over!!)

She heard multiple metallic noises.

It sounded like something was jumping down from the balcony onto the top of a car roof. Shirai recalled where she and her opponents were.

She was on the second floor and the attackers were on the third floor.

(There are 18 of them.)

"(…Uiharu, some of them are leaving! Don't let them escape!!)"

"More importantly, Shirai-san, I'm detecting some waves other than the ultra high frequency ones!"

"…?"

"They seem to be searching for the pattern of slight distortion a human's magnetism causes in electromagnetic waves and are aiming for that! They will find you even if you are behind the cover of a wall or a ceiling!!”

“Please just tell me that part first!!”

Shirai frantically teleported away before she had even finished speaking.

She moved from room to room.

The mysterious camera flash-like firing sound accurately followed her as she went.

At that rate, she would end up being hit.

Part 6

The reaction disappeared.

(…?)

The man holding a strange rifle in one room of the apartment building moved his eyes away from the sight with a doubtful look on his face. The thick tube attached to the left side of the gun was the unit which fired the packages with SC39 in them.

He spoke to a comrade who was also scanning the area with an identical rifle.

“What do you think?”

“She may have escaped,” was the frank response. “Even with a corpse, we should be able to detect a magnetic reaction. It isn’t normal for it to completely disappear.”

Of course, it was also not normal for a human to disappear ignoring the walls and passageways. However, the target had made some odd movements even before disappearing. It had been to the point that he was proud of himself for not just writing it off as a malfunction with the equipment.

“So this is Academy City.”

“She must be a Teleporter.”

If their opponent had escaped, that meant she was still alive. Not killing her had been a bad move, but the two of them decided it did not matter. It was too late for the target to do anything.

They were the only ones there.

The rest had jumped down from the balcony and left in a vehicle.

That apartment building had just been a gathering point.

Using various methods, they had managed to bring the items important to their plan as well as parts to those items into Academy City. They would gather all those items together in one place, assemble them, and then carry them to the next gathering point. By repeating that, they would complete the truly important item bit by bit.

Even at the current stage, they had already finished assembling the main shaft.

If they could gather together the small supports, they could begin to actually carry out their plan.

“This gathering point’s role is over. We need to erase all traces of our presence and get out of here quickly.”

“You fired too many unnecessary shots. It isn’t like there’s no risk to us.”

The protective suits they wore were incredibly simple. From a distance, they may have looked like two piece raincoats. They did nothing more than make sure they did not receive any after affects from the rifles they were firing.

They carried out an adequate level of “cleaning” and then headed for the entrance while still wearing their raincoat-like protective suits.

The instant one of them grabbed the doorknob, a metal arrow pierced straight through the palm of the protective suit and the doorknob.

“Oh.”

For an instant, he did not feel any pain.

Before his proper senses could return, more metal arrows assaulted him.

“Oh…oh…ooooohhhhhhh!?”

Multiple metal arrows pierced through both his arms and both his legs and he started to collapse to the floor. However, the man in the protective suit could not completely fall because he was sewn to the doorknob through his palm. The ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifle slipped from his hand. The man only understood that someone had attacked him in some strange way and he spoke to his comrade next to him.

“Hey, scan the area!! We need to at least figure out where the enemy i—”

The man trailed off as his words became caught in his throat.

His comrade was collapsed on the floor. The other man had metal arrows stabbing into his body in places just like the first man.

And…

“You shouldn’t swing around such dangerous things,” said a girl’s voice.

The voice was coming from the center of the room.

The man immediately moved his arm that had been pierced to the bone in an attempt to grab his ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifle, but his hand was crushed under a foot before he could.

Intense pain ran through his arm.

But the weight was much greater than that of a single girl.

Groaning, the man looked up at the attacker’s face.

“Wh-wha…!?”

“You were using electromagnetic waves to search for the magnetic reaction of a human body, weren’t you?” The girl spoke while showing off her body that sparkled a dark gray. “Then my reaction would disappear if I did this, right? Despite how I look, I can freely ‘carry’ 130.7 kilograms.”

“A steel suit of armor…!?”

“Given that I was able to put it on by myself, it seems to be purely ornamental rather than intended for actual combat.”

“W-wait, why do you have something like that!?”

“This is a storage area for the wealthy. You know how suits of armor are, right? You end up buying one, but then you don’t have anywhere to put it, so you end up sticking it in a corner where it just gathers dust.”

“What? No!! Why the hell do you think I would know anything about that!?” the man yelled without thinking in protest of the unreasonable situation he had ended up in.

“Armor punch, armor kick, armor headbutt, armor body press!!”

“Gbhfgyeh!?”

Upon receiving those attacks in quick succession, the man seriously coughed up blood and then passed out.

Shirai gave a light sigh within the thick armor and then looked over at the man’s accomplice. He was not moving and it seemed he had lost consciousness from the shock of being pierced by so many metal arrows.

Shirai skillfully grabbed her cell phone with the thick fingers of the armor.

“I’ve finished up here. Uiharu, you’re tracking the ones who escaped, right? Oh, and contact Anti-Skill. If we show them these ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifles, they won’t be able to say it’s just nonsense from some students.”

“Sh-Shirai-san!!”

Uiharu’s pressured voice shook Shirai’s eardrums.

There was some static running through her voice.

Immediately afterwards, a massive amount of harmful electromagnetic waves that had been fired from a distance penetrated that room of the apartment building.

Part 7

The explosion was incredibly simple to understand.

On the other hand, the ultra high frequency electromagnetic waves below the surface were much more frightening than the flames or heat.

They noiselessly approached and damaged the structure of a living being.

A large amount of ultra high frequency electromagnetic waves in a short period of time had a high risk of destroying the cycle of cell division. And even if one was fine after that short period of time, the danger could suddenly show itself after 5 to 10 years of nothing.

A massive amount of those harmful electromagnetic waves swept across that room in the apartment building.

But…

“Hoo…” Shirai Kuroko breathed out.

Her body was no longer surrounded by the suit of armor.

She held two men in her arms.

“We were saved by the fact that we were on the third floor. I just can’t teleport two grown men along with me.”

In other words, she had jumped down from the third floor.

Only that room had been targeted, so as long as they escaped that, their lives would not be taken by the waves.

“…Even if it is a highly directional exposure method, that was rather reckless.”

The people from the Russian shopping mall may not have cared because they would be glad to cause even more damage, but for Shirai and the rest of Academy City, it was a major problem.

(The detector and the ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifles are not all there is. Those are nothing more than a popular weapon that was distributed to all the members. It’s true that they can be used to silently go on a shooting spree and cause quite a bit of damage, but…)

“Uiharu, is Anti-Skill going to take action?”

“Y-yes. The ultra high frequency electromagnetic waves were strong enough to be seen on the satellite, after all. From the way they were acting, I’m half expecting to receive a note of protest asking why we did not report this sooner.”

Shirai silently cursed Anti-Skill, but spoke of a different subject.

“Then contact the research institutions and advise that that they prepare some of the powered suits that are used for work in nuclear facilities. They are not hesitating to use those ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifles. But at the same time, that is all they are. If we can negate their ability to do damage with those waves, we have nothing to fear from them.”

There were also the explosions caused using the harmful electromagnetic wave detector and they may have been armed with other firearms, but even a noncombat powered suit was tough enough to stand up to a rifle bullet. The ones for nuclear facilities would completely cover the operator’s body with no gaps, so they may even be better than a military model when it came to pure toughness.

(Actually defeating them should be simple enough… That just leaves quickly bringing this to an end before they get desperate and decide to go out in a shooting spree.)

“Shirai-san, what are you going to do?”

“Good question...” Shirai Kuroko pulled handcuffs from her skirt’s pocket and turned in the direction of the collapsed men as she responded to Uiharu. “Give me the tracking data on the remaining ones. I’ll continue the investigation in my own way.”

Part 8

In a security guard office, Enirya G. Algonskaya looked at the investigation materials being displayed on the wall's Semipublic AR.

Misaka Mikoto still had not been found.

There had also been no hints related to the possible group that had killed someone and removed their body from the production plant for the oranges and crimson long-legged army ants.

Were those two different things?

Or was there a connection between them?

"…"

As a security guard, it was Enirya's duty to protect the peace of that shopping mall. She was shocked at the fact that someone knew how to escape detection within that shopping mall better than her. She had thought the security guards understood that city perfectly.

In other words…

(There is something lurking in this city in an even deeper area than I know of.)

She had a vague feeling that her normal methods of investigating would not directly lead her there. But at the same time, it was necessary for that to be the case. If the construction of the shopping mall was completely within what they thought it was, then it would be impossible for a suspect to slip through their fingers like that.

Whether it was Misaka Mikoto or some group that had removed the body, they were passing through places Enirya did not know of and doing things she was not aware of.

If she checked the parts of that incident that even she did not understand, she might be able to find some logical answer.

Was it Misaka Mikoto or someone else?

Pursuing the suspects in the crimson long-legged army ant case was her job as a security guard, but after coming that far, she felt the need to take a bit of a detour.

(…The higher ups, hm?)

Enirya simply looked up at the ceiling and thought of something else.

She had barely been aware of them up until then…or rather, she and her colleagues actually on the scene had felt they knew more about the city than them. But now their existence seemed to grow.

Those people who had done everything from designing to managing the city would likely know even the things Enirya did not.

If she thought through everything again once she had that information, she might be able to see the logic of the incident. Or she might be able to see what was to come. It was possible she would be able to predict where the suspects would head and what they would try to do.

(But the problem is whether a mere pet dog has enough freedom to get that information.)

As Enirya silently thought that, she heard the voice of a colleague.

“You got a second? I’m not sure if this has anything to do with the case, but…”

“What?”

“Look at this.”

By operating the wall’s Semipublic AR, Enirya’s colleague set it at a level where she could view it, too. The screen displayed an internet board. The heading said

“Mysterious Phenomena Special Feature”.

“If I recall correctly, on the day of the crimson long-legged army ant incident, the story of the very valuable orange spread around explosively and the actual incident occurred shortly thereafter. A few days before, the story had involved a cactus and scorpions, but it suddenly changed to the story of the orange on the day the primary suspect appeared here. …Look at this other story here. It’s an utterly absurd story, but it seems to be spreading over boards all over the place. What if…?”

“What if the next incident occurs with that story as its motif?”

“It seems possible to me…”

“Have you checked where the posts were sent from?”

“Yes, but they’re most likely innocent. There’s a flower shop worker, a hotel worker, a tourist from Brazil, and even a fellow security guard… I don’t see any connection.”

“…”

It had been the same with the orange story. The posts had spread in no time at all, but there had been no connection between the individual people. That was when they had started to focus on Misaka Mikoto as the person who had initially brought the story to the local network of the shopping mall.

“So this urban legend is about…” Enirya frowned. “The necklace of death?”

“No.” Her colleague scrolled down. “It’s this next one.”

Part 9

Inside the 177th Judgment Branch, Uiharu slowly stretched.

She did not think it was a good thing for a first year middle school girl to have stiff shoulders, but that was a problem everyone had regardless of age after sitting at a computer for a long period of time.

She was taking time to stretch because the incident was showing signs of coming to an end.

She leaned back in her chair and slowly let out a breath.

(But what was with those ultra high frequency electromagnetic waves? I should have had Shirai-san tell me everything she knows.)

Complaining about it would not help and Shirai Kuroko’s methods would not be changed so easily. Those were the actions characteristic of one with great ability, so it wasn’t that uncommon.

Suddenly, her cell phone started to ring.

It indicated an email, not a phone call.

Uiharu thought something more had happened regarding the incident, but instead it was from her classmate Saten Ruiko. While paying attention to her computer’s monitor, Uiharu operated her cell phone. To be completely honest, she felt a bit relieved because it felt like she was being brought back to her normal school life.

The contents of the email were as follows:

“Sender: Saten Ruiko

Subject: Go check this out right away

Body: Hey, Uiharu, what’re you doing right now? The urban legend special on Channel CS119 is getting pretty awesome.”

It was indeed rather silly, but that was pretty much all emails between students tended to be. It would have been stranger for the contents to be full of important things one could not overlook like an incident or the whereabouts of a criminal.

Uiharu moved her thumbs across the keys.

“Subject: Now?

Body: I don’t have a contract for such a minor show.”

That was her short response.

Less than 10 seconds later, she received a reply. That cycle repeated making it less an email conversation and more a 1 on 1 chat.

Uiharu was faster when it came to typing on a computer, but Saten was faster when it came to using a cell phone. In fact, she was the only one that could get that speed with a single thumb.

“Sender: Saten Ruiko

Subject: Question

Body: Eh? You have the fiber optic cable for the broadcast connected, right?”

“Subject: Answer

Body: Well, yes.”

“Sender: Saten Ruiko

Subject: Then I have a request

Body: The CS has a trial service. There will be some annoying text in the middle of the screen telling you how to register, but you only need to hear it, so that won’t be a problem. Just take a look at CS119!!”

“Subject: I’m in the middle of work

Body: I’m at the Judgment office, so I can’t watch it either way.”

“Sender: Saten Ruiko

Subject: It has to be now!

Body: Eh? Too bad. They’re in the middle of an awesome discussion of the necklace of death! If you don’t hurry, they’ll go on to the next thing!!”

Uiharu’s eyes widened in shock and her thumbs almost stopped moving.

But Saten was just talking about a silly variety show made up of rumors that were spreading through the city. They wouldn’t be talking about a dangerous incident involving ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifles or protective suits. Even such a minor CS would not be able to air something like that.

Uiharu tried to match her conversation to who she was speaking with.

She tried to keep it at a silly discussion.

“Subject: The necklace of death?

Body: That’s the story about the girl who dies after receiving a uranium crystal necklace from her boyfriend, right?”

“Sender: Saten Ruiko

Subject: Too bad!!

Body: Yes, that’s quite sharp of you Uiharu! …is what I’d like to say, but that’s the old one. The latest urban legend has advanced to the next stage!!”

That time, Uiharu felt her insides freeze over.

Her thumbs were not moving.

She wanted to ask a question, but her field of vision narrowed and she could not hit the keys.

Saten did not notice and sent yet another email.

“Sender: Saten Ruiko

Subject: The latest info

Body: It says there’s this mysterious shopping mall in Russia that sells anything. They do business in all sorts of things there. Weapons, drugs, slaves, and nuclear materials!! It’s a black market with everything you can think of!”

Uiharu desperately wished for her classmate to stop.

However, she could not hit the keys needed to say so.

During that time, the information from Saten continued to come.

The urban legend that was becoming worse and worse by the moment innocently stabbed into Uiharu Kazari’s heart.

“(Continuation of the body) Anyway, a highly dense piece of nuclear material sold there was made into the form of a sculpture and covered with a coating of melted lead. It was then brought into Academy City. According to the story, it was left somewhere in the city as part of a deal, but it has to be found before the terrorists hidden in Academy City get their hands on it and make it into a nuclear bomb!!”

Chapter 6

Part 1

“A nuclear bomb!?” Misaka Mikoto yelled into her cell phone in the backroom of the occult convenience store.

Shirai Kuroko was on the other end.

“Yes. I don’t know how the rumor ended up changing like that. …It may have simply been that the original story had to do with a uranium crystal, so it made people think of a nuclear bomb.”

“…I wonder if this change was part of their plan.”

The problem was who it was that was going to intentionally cause an incident related to the urban legend.

And there was the fact that there were currently terrorists hidden in Academy City who were armed with weapons that used ultra high frequency electromagnetic waves. Not to mention that they had been brought in from the Russian shopping mall.

The ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifles were enough of a threat, but the possibility of the danger being much, much higher had just gotten a lot more likely.

After all…

“The shopping mall used the Code EIC system to spread the rumor. If the uranium ornament is part of the plan of the shopping mall’s higher ups, then they will cause an incident related to it. If their plan is to cause catastrophic damage to Academy City so the value of their unreliable scientific information on developing psychic powers rises astronomically, then the bigger the scale of the incident, the better for them…”

“It’s true that this would resolve everything much more simply than just creating small bits of damage with the ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifles and the harmful electromagnetic wave detector.”

“The ones trying to cause the incident may have revised the contents of the urban legend in order to detonate a nuke…”

Lessar operated the screen of a smartphone with her index finger and then lightly struck the table with a corner of the device. When Mikoto looked over, Lessar showed her the screen.

It showed the search results from a search engine.

There was a list of sites and boards that had the keywords “uranium ornament” in them. The number of results was already beyond 100,000.

Mikoto started thinking that the rumor must have really started to spread through the Russian shopping mall too, but then she realized she was wrong.

The search engine Lessar was using was not a local one that only searched the shopping mall. It was a worldwide one.

(…What? Are the effects of Code EIC expanding?)

“Kuroko, have any actual nuclear materials or bombs been found in Academy City?”

“Not yet. But Uiharu is…a colleague of mine is tracking their escape route. I assume they have not already made into a bomb and I do not think they can put one together while on the run.”

“But it’s still possible. There’s even the risk of damage caused by having the enriched uranium leave its container in the process of suppressing them.” Mikoto thought for a bit. “What about evacuating the residents of Academy City?”

“This wouldn’t be so difficult if we could do that. If we made this information public, it would cause a panic throughout the city which would create secondary damages. If all 2.3 million residents tried to leave at once, the transportation facilities would be paralyzed and it would all fall apart near the gates.”

"…"

"Also, the majority of Anti-Skill is skeptical of the existence of the nuclear bomb. They are interpreting this as the terrorists with the ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifles trying to bring the city into a panic so Anti-Skill will be unable to function properly allowing them to escape."

Mikoto felt that was being too calm given the situation, but it was true that they had no proof of a nuclear bomb in Academy City. It was just an urban legend.

"Understood. Contact me again once Anti-Skill begins their suppression operation."

"What will you do, onee-sama?"

"I'll do what I can," Mikoto sighed. "The people truly behind this are in this city. If I defeat them, I should be able to get accurate information on what the terrorists in Academy City have and what they plan to do."

She hung up.

The situation had gotten even more serious. The new crisis made the living bombs using special ants pale in comparison.

"That certainly seems bad," said Lessar as her fingers raced across the smartphone once more.

She sounded as if the situation did not affect her. For a foreigner like Lessar, it may have seemed like nothing more than a war in a distant country.

"The urban legend that had been spreading through both the shopping mall and Academy City has begun to spread throughout the entire world. Someone is clearly behind it. I don't know what they're trying to do, but it seems the window to 'outside' has been opened in Code EIC. …They likely can't conveniently control the media outside the shopping mall in the same way, but they can provide a stimulus through various media with a time delay by using 'foreign news' as a substitute."

Even just within the shopping mall, Code EIC had caused a rather large problem.

If its effects spread to the entire world, the scale of the incidents would skyrocket.

Baseless data could have an effect on the physical world.

Just by adding in data, they could destroy people’s minds.

“Before, you spoke like you knew how Code EIC was controlled. You said you wanted to explain it, but that there wasn’t enough time.”

“I wasn’t trying to put on airs of importance or anything. That just happened to be when the remote controlled snowplow drove into the building.”

“But now’s fine, right?” Mikoto said cutting her off. “Tell me right here and now what is at the center of Code EIC. We need to go directly destroy the source of the urban legends.”

Part 2

Mikoto exited the occult convenience store and sensed that something was off. It was an unpleasant prickling feeling in her skin. It was an odd sense of tension where the slightest sound seemed as if it would set off bloodshed like during a standoff between a police squad and a group of people about to riot.

“Wait, what is going on out here…?”

“Well, Academy City is not the only place filled with urban legends,” Lessar said and laughed. “Nee hee hee. The people in this shopping mall have reached their mental saturation point. They can’t distinguish between the truth and lies, so when they hear a rumor that a nuclear bomb in an unknown location could detonate at any time, they have begun to take it seriously. That’s how it seems to me, at least.”

Suddenly, Mikoto heard a slight noise.

They were in an area filled with small tenant-owned shops and a large white man had come out of one of those shops.

There was an odd light in his eyes.

Fear, anger, and joy at being permitted to destroy could be seen in that light.

When he saw Mikoto, he first muttered something in Russian.

Then, he let out an explosive shout.

“He’s shouting ‘I’ve found her’.”

“You don’t have to tell me that! I can understand Russian!! More importantly, what’s with that reaction!? Did the security guards release a picture of me as the suspect in the orange case!?”

“Hmm, it seems the details of the uranium ornament story were altered for easiest use for the Academy City version and the shopping mall version. But I think that change happened in the process of spreading from person to person rather than by using Code EIC to control it.”

“What?”

“Just saying the people of the shopping center are villains running a black market wouldn’t hold much interest here, so the story ended up changing. Here the story says some enriched uranium was sold here, but that it was brought in by someone from Academy City who is trying to cause a nuclear explosion here in order to get rid of the shopping mall.”

“In other words…”

As Mikoto started to take over the explanation, the large shouting white man reached for his waist. There was a holster attached to his belt.

“…they may have been keeping my personal information a secret up to the day of the demonstration, but there could still have been some partial rumors such that I was a girl and around middle school age.”

While looking at an oddly small handgun that did not suit the large man, Lessar spoke.

“I suppose right now any Academy City Asian middle school girls will be treated like terrorists in this city.”

Mikoto and Lessar moved at the same instant as if being repelled by the other.

As they moved quickly to the left and the right leaping behind nearby pillars, a dry gunshot exploded out.

“I don’t like this society of guns!! Why would you let just anyone have a gun!?”

“That’s not really something a girl who can fire a coin at three times the speed of sound should be saying.”

“The problem is,” Mikoto said changing the subject, “less about this cheerful man and his gun and more about whether these gunshots will rouse up the rest of the people.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“I will of course…”

While multiple bullets caused sparks to fly from the pillar she was using as a shield, Mikoto calmly watched the motions of her target without shutting her eyes.

“…quickly silence him.”

Immediately after she said that, an electronic noise came from right beside the white man.

What looked like a human figure jumped in his peripheral vision.

The man immediately looked over there, but then he froze.

There was only a wall there.

The man had turned his vision to an image of Mikoto on the Semipublic AR.

(His aim has gone astray!!)

Immediately afterwards, the sound of building materials breaking could be heard.

It was coming from above.

A power cable as thick as a thumb ran across inside the ceiling. And that cable was attached using iron fixtures at even intervals.

Mikoto magnetically manipulated those fixtures to indirectly move the power cable.

The white man stopped moving again more in shock over the fact that the cable was unnaturally floating than at the destruction being done.

The sound of something slicing through the air could be heard.

A strike swooping up from below knocked the handgun from the man’s hand. However, that was not enough to neutralize him. Mikoto continued to swing the cable around.

Five consecutive strikes assaulted the man.

The man used his thick arms to cover his face and upper body and Mikoto darted from behind the pillar and dashed toward the man. By ducking under his guarding arms, she tackled him as if trying to embrace his waist which knocked the man to the floor.

A dull sound exploded out.

“Okay!! Now I—!!”

Mikoto was about to bind the man’s arms and legs using some smaller cables, but she suddenly froze in shock.

The man who had been struck to the ground was still stretching out his arms.

Normally, the blow should have knocked him out.

At the very least, he should have been having trouble breathing.

“He’s in a riotous state! He’s full of adrenaline, but his reason has been compromised!! The Code EIC rumors have agitated him. It’s possible that he can’t feel normal pain!!” yelled Lessar from a short distance.

“…!!”

In order to avoid having her legs grabbed, Mikoto stepped back and put some distance between her and the man.

With his body leaning to the side, the white man slowly tried to stand back up. Also, the handgun was now back in his hand.

“What am I supposed to do about this…?”

Just being prepared to knock someone unconscious or stop their movements was not enough.

Most likely, they would still come for her even if she broke their arms and legs. Most likely, even if she damaged their organs, they would keep moving until the moment their hearts stopped. To stop the rioters for sure, she would need even more violence.

In other words, she could not stop them unless she killed them.

And she did not have time to hesitate.

She saw a few more men and women peering around a corner.

They had most likely headed over after hearing the gunfire. At first, they looked shocked upon seeing Mikoto and the white man, but their expressions soon changed.

(This is bad.)

Mikoto felt a chill run down her spine.

She could practically see an illusion of a small fire spreading throughout the area.

“Help me out!! She’s a monster! She suddenly came and struck me while I was just walking along!!” the white man yelled out in anger to clinch things.

Mikoto had no time to cry out in protest.

The expressions of the men and women who were glaring at her (the terms peering or looking no longer accurately expressed what they were doing) from around the corner were so twisted they barely looked human.

“Oh, crap.”

Mikoto took swift action upon seeing one of them holding the kind of axe that was used by firefighters or for emergency escape.

She magnetically manipulated the rebar at her feet to cause the floor to cave in.

With a great noise, Mikoto fell down to the next floor down.

“If you’re going to run, give me a sign first,” Lessar said in a carefree voice.

Mikoto had no idea when the girl had managed to get so close to her.

But she had no time to worry about it.

“Oh dear. This is bad, this is bad. …I’m not even close to joking when I say this area is really, really bad.”

“Wh-why?”

“It looks like everyone came rushing here hoping to turn their life around in one shot. The gun shop corner is pretty much being looted.”

“Ugehgeh!! Why did we fall down into an area full of guns!?”

Mikoto’s eyes widened.

It seemed to be a place packed full of all the gun shops registered with the shopping mall, but they were selling ice cream like normal right next to it all. It was being treated just like the bookstore corner. The feelings toward guns were completely different than in Japan.

“I thought the shopping mall was supposed to be divided between necessary daily items and the entertainment or luxury items!”

“What are you talking about? A rifle is necessary for daily life.”

“…Seriously?”

“In this country, things don’t get to the level of entertainment or a hobby until you get up to a rocket launcher or a Gatling gun.”

“Oh, god damn it… Next you’re gonna tell me people here fire railguns for fun.”

“Anyway, things could get bad if this looting continues.”

“Are you saying something even worse is going to happen!?”

“With their blood rushing to their heads like this, I doubt they’re intentionally going for it, but there is a large vault in the underground space further back in the gun shop corner. It’s about the size of a hangar from a private airport.”

“What’s inside the vault?”

“Viner,” Lessar quickly responded. “It’s filled with weapons scheduled to appear in a summer weapons show that specializes in ground weapons. There are weapons from the 14 major companies in the world as well as Academy City. There is more of a difference than you would ever want to know between these ‘everyday necessities’ out here and what is in there.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me…”

Tons of rifles were neatly lined up in large glass showcases as if they were brand name bags. The storage areas in the back were packed full of guns and ammunition.

But the glass had been smashed to pieces.

High-pitched alarms hurt their ears.

No one had turned around when Mikoto had come crashing down from above because they were causing similar noises themselves.

Dozens of pairs of hands grabbed at brand new rifles like people fighting over items during a good sale. Ammunition was spilled all over the floor. Some people ran around while shoving multiple guns into shopping carts, some people stuck handguns into their belts, and some people grabbed up a bunch of rifles and then were punched from the side by someone else who took all the rifles from them. No mercy was shown to anyone regardless of age or gender. Guns were flying all over the place like when each customer was limited to one package of eggs so people had their kids line up to buy some, too.

Mikoto’s face paled at that scene that was outside of common Japanese knowledge.

“…Are they stupid? I could understand one or two, but what are they planning to do with an armful of guns!?”

“I wonder if the precious metals are being stolen in the same way or if the people here are leveling themselves up in order to attack stores with more value. At any rate, it does not look like things are going to be quiet.”

It may have been a mistake to start speaking in Japanese.

The people had not reacted when the ceiling had come crashing down, but their gazes and the barrels of their guns all pointed in Mikoto's direction when she spoke.

"Wow. An enemy sure is a powerful thing when it comes to justifying crimes!"

"This is no time to be giving carefree commentary on the situation!!"

Mikoto pulled on Lessar's arm and jumped behind a nearby shelf. After she did, she came to the shocking realization that the shelf was filled with ammunition, but it was too late to hide elsewhere.

Immediately afterwards, the sound of gunfire followed them.

The relatively heavy looking shelves and the products lined up on them were mercilessly pierced by the bullets. Their opponents were firing military rifles rather than handguns. The shelves would not act as a shield against that.

Mikoto complained quietly as she jumped behind another shelf that had everything from ammunition accessories to something like a tripod.

"What the hell!? That old man is firing at us with a monstrous look on his face!! Someone needs to stop him before he collapses from high blood pressure!!"

"It's lucky those are downgraded civilian models. If they had proper full auto functionality, this truly would've been bad."

"Even with semi-auto, it's still pretty much a constant stream of bullets with that many guns."

Their opponents were not soldiers under a unified command. They were just worked up rioters. It seemed a few of them were trying to circle around, but Mikoto was more worried about them taking each other out in friendly fire.

Mikoto looked around the area while rushing out of the area lined with shelves, across the open hallway, and into another area lined with shelves.

"Where are the security guards?"

“They won’t be able to put out this fire. The fire has already spread to the dry grass. As the number of people with guns grows, not even the security guards will be able to do anything about it. All they can probably do is isolate the fire so it doesn’t make its way to the truly important petrochemical complex.”

That city was noisily crumbling.

The instant the power balance between those protecting the peace of the city and those destroying it reversed, it was as if oil scattered on the floor had caught fire. The curtain opened on a nightmarish stage where people devoured other people.

Mikoto realized her entire body was trembling.

That violence was in a completely different dimension from the times she had gotten in fights with delinquents in the back alleys of Academy City. If it gained enough momentum, it would just swallow everything up. Both the good and the bad, both the assailant and the victim, and everyone else would sink down into the sea of blood they had created with their own hands.

“I have to stop this…” Mikoto muttered as she stopped her feet that were carrying her from one row of shelves to another. “I have to stop this before those guns make it everywhere in this city!!”

“Personally, I think that’s rather pointless,” Lessar said in an almost ridiculing manner.

It was possible that was not the first time the mysterious girl had been in a situation like that.

“Things are already flowing in that direction. It has permeated every nook and cranny of the city. Even if you manage to suppress everyone in this gun shop corner, it will not stop the overall disturbance. Plenty of people already have handguns.”

“Then what?” Mikoto said speaking overly quickly due to her nervousness. “It’s true that there are probably people who already have handguns and that defeating the people in this gun shop corner will not stop all of this primitive violence. But if all the guns here get scattered around, the density of the violence will rise significantly. It will get to the point where no one will even be able to survive even by a miracle. That’s why I have to at least stop that from happening. I need to bring the violence down to a level where the word miracle can at least still have its place."

Lessar sighed.

"…Um. Are you aware that you'll be doing nothing more than satisfying yourself as long as you don't resolve the fundamental problem?"

"I know, I know."

"And are you aware that you'll be risking your life in order to satisfy the feelings of a single individual?"

"I know that too," Mikoto said while looking Lessar in the eye. "That's why I'm not asking you to stay with me. You need to head to the facility with Code EIC's centralized control in it as originally planned. We can't let this riot spread any further, but that's also why we can't just ignore Code EIC either."

"You say it likes it easy…" Lessar thought for a bit and then spoke quietly. "You're suggesting we split up, but how am I supposed to escape in this situation? All of those rioters have rifles. Not to mention that we're pretty much surrounded."

"Not necessarily."

"?"

Lessar frowned and Mikoto tapped her foot on the ground.

"There's a convenient duct passing through down below. However, if we both went inside and disappeared from view, they would notice right away."

But if they split up there and one of them went on a rampage, the rioters' focus would be drawn to that one. In that time, the other could safely sneak to the center of Code EIC and destroy it.

"…At the base, these rioters are in a panic stemming from the urban legend of the uranium ornament, so they may calm down if Code EIC is stopped."

"We have no proof of that. That many people is enough to wear even you down.

If you go all out and run around expecting them to stop, it may be too late by the time you realize they aren't going to stop."

"…"

Mikoto understood that danger.

After all, she was the primary target of the rioters. If she made a mistake, she would definitely be given a long, painful death in a flood of primitive violence.

Understanding that quite well, Mikoto spoke.

"…That isn't for you to worry about."

"Seriously? This kind of hot-blooded mood just isn't part of my character, so I'm not going to go along with it."

"Then get going."

"Chehh," Lesser muttered before pulling a four-bladed spear-like weapon from somewhere.

She stabbed it into the floor and one of the blades passed through the gap around the square duct cover. She used the principle of leverage to easily open it.

"I won't shed any tears if you die, so try to stay alive."

"I'll haunt you if I do, so at least tell me where the center of Code EIC is."

"It's in an underground facility called the stock market center. The stocks of all the countless stores registered in this shopping mall are traded there and deals are made using money from all over the world."

"I see. A large scale communications network needs a processor that can calculate that massive amount of data instantly. That would be perfect to act as the center of Code EIC."

"Given the location, it really does seem like they intended to spread their reach beyond the shopping mall in the end. It gives me a bad feeling and it fits with this disturbance."

After saying that, Lessar jumped into the square hole.

Just her head was sticking out.

“Okay, I look forward to seeing you again assuming it isn’t as a ghost.”

“Sorry, but people from Academy City don’t believe in spiritual phenomena, so if I’m going to haunt you, I’ll do it scientifically.”

Lessar ducked her head down and Mikoto moved the square cover with her foot so it closed up the entrance.

Mikoto then heard a creaking sound.

It was not coming from just one place. The sound seemed to be surrounding her and it seemed to be slowly approaching her.

“Now then…” Bluish-white sparks flew from her bangs. “I thinks it’s time for a fun demonstration of just how powerful Academy City’s #3 is.”

Part 3

The security guard named Enirya G. Algonskaya shouted into her radio.

“I already told you!! Bring down all the functioning shutters!! Cut off all the communication connections!! Don’t let those taking part in the riots gather beyond a certain level! They’re only civilians! We don’t need to be afraid of them if we can get them in a situation where we can attack and restrain them individually!!”

She instinctually ducked down when she heard some dry gunshots.

Sparks flew from the barricade made from a car dealer’s display model.

(…Dammit. They’re using handguns, but those aren’t normal bullets. If I hadn’t packed that stuff into the car, they would be piercing straight through.)

The normally spacious inside of the car was filled with iron scraps. They were square masses of packed together crushed cans that had been gathered for recycling. Even something usually weak like that could be effective if you gathered together enough of them.

And it was the same with the civilian rioters.

“The riots are even now cropping up in more areas!! They’re mostly around the north and east gates, but they’re heading inward. At this rate, it’s going to spread throughout the entire city!!”

“This is Unit C. It seems they have realized that we are using nonlethal rubber bullets! Their actions are clearly getting bolder!! We can’t deal with rapid fire handguns with this equipment!! Even if we’re wearing bulletproof vests, we’ll be unable to continue if we keep getting hit!!”

(So we’re at our limit…)

Enirya’s face turned bitter.

Protecting the peace was only effective in a situation where one chased after the minority that broke the rules while the majority followed the rules. If every single person in the city stopped listening to them, their effectiveness became paralyzed.

Once that happened, all that was left was to use weapons until one side was silenced.

And on top of that…

(We’re being pushed back more by the difference in numbers than in the quality of our equipment… They have more strength right now. If they realize that, the rioters will gain the sense of superiority that being in the majority brings. Then words and actions will not be able to get through to them!!)

“God damn it…” Enirya spat out. “What are we doing!? Following the manual as to what gets top priority? Escorting the VIPs to safety? How many civilians do you think will be killed while we’re protecting those old men that can only think of their own safety!?”

“I can’t contact those higher ups,” said a colleague of hers who was hiding behind the makeshift barricade. “They ordered us to secure escape route C and allow the priority members to escape to safety, but ever since then I haven’t heard a word from them. They’re supposed to have transmitters on them to tell where they are, but….”

“Do you think they were swallowed up by the rioters?”

“I don’t want to think they’re that stupid. If they were, I’d want to kill myself for following their orders for so long.”

“Same here,” Enirya said while checking on how many spare magazines she had. “Most likely, the higher ups are doing something in secret that they don’t feel the need to inform us of. They’re probably carrying out some master plan that does not involve stopping the rioters. In other words, they’re probably just leaving us here to die.”

“What do we do?” said her colleague while carefully choosing his words. “Do we just carry out the role of the dog that follows the order of ‘stay’ until it starves to death?”

“Our duty is to protect the peace of this city,” Enirya responded without a second’s delay. “I didn’t quit my job as a police inspector and come here just to curry the favor of some old men.”

If they could quit guarding the escape route for the higher ups who probably weren’t even coming, they had a lot more options. As she had said before, the rioters were civilians. Just by laying traps and falling back, they could neutralize and corner a group that size.

What should they do in order to rob the rioters of their fighting spirit without killing them while at the same time avoid having any of the security guards getting swallowed up by the rioters?

Enirya was envisioning the layout of the facility in her mind when she heard a new piece of information.

“I have a report from Unit G that is working to suppress the rioters near the gun shop area!!”

“Dammit, has that area fallen to them!? All the ground weapons for the weapons show are being stored there!!”

“No, the samples for Viner are safe.” Her colleague sounded as if he could not believe what he was saying. “I can’t confirm it on the surveillance cameras, but…it seems a single civilian is fighting to hold back the rioters attacking the gun shop area!!”

“A…civilian…?”

“It’s Misaka Mikoto.”

Enirya was completely dumbfounded and her colleague continued.

“It seems she’s working to prevent those deadly weapons from spreading through the very shopping mall that was chasing after her.”

“…”

Enirya had a few thoughts in that instant.

"…Is there a path to the gun shop area?"

"Are you planning to get her help? Despite what she's doing, she's still the primary suspect, you know!?"

"No, not that." Enirya spat out. "These riots seemed to have been sparked by the urban legend of the uranium ornament. And their goal is the death of the girl who is supposedly trying to detonate a nuke."

"You don't mean…"

"All of these rioters have their eyes on that girl, so we need to restrain them before the worst happens."

Most likely, the riots would not stop even if Misaka Mikoto were truly killed. Once that primitive violence gained momentum, it would continue for some time before their desires died down.

But at the same time, that girl was at the center of the riots.

That girl could greatly change the direction of the riot. She could lead to a method of controlling them. They could not lose that. They needed to use it.

"The target is continually moving around rather than staying in one place."

"Of course she is. If she didn't, she would be swallowed up by the waves of people," Enirya said with a look of disinterest. "Use the surveillance equipment to determine where the rioting is at its strongest. That will be where we will find that girl."

Part 4

Misaka Mikoto jumped out from behind a battered shelf.

At the same time, multiple gunshots chased after her.

Intense bluish-white sparks flew from her entire body starting with her bangs. The flash and roar were just like that from actual lightning. The tremendous light and noise pounded an extremely primal fear into the hearts of the rioters that were staring at her through their gun sights.

Simply put, it was similar to a stun grenade.

However, the problem was that they held rifles or handguns in their hands. The flash and roar did make them flinch away and it succeeded in taking a few of their senses from them, but at the same time, their trigger fingers pulled back almost reflexively.

Even more bullets flew through the air.

Mikoto had been heading for a nearby shelf, but she gave up on that and used magnetism to forcibly pull the shelf closer.

The rifle bullets could easily pierce straight through the shelf.

However, Mikoto used magnetism to crush the shelf raising its density. As a result, it just barely managed to stop the deadly bullets.

Mikoto then threw the crushed shelf at the group of rioters.

Multiple people were knocked away as if they were bowling pins.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

With a universally understood cry, men and women continued to charge for her despite having blood flowing from their foreheads. It did not matter whether they held guns. Mikoto had been determined to be pure evil, so they were mercilessly heading for her as if they enjoyed the fact that they had made that determination.

(The lowering of their ability to think has dulled their sense of pain… Dammit, this is practically a scene from a zombie movie!!)

The crackling of bluish-white sparks exploded out.

A high voltage current flew straight ahead and finally stole the use of his limbs from a rioter and knocked him unconscious.

Or so it should have.

“Gh…gh…”

Despite having collapsed, the rioter’s fingertips were wriggling which caused even Mikoto to gasp in surprise.

And then…

(…?)

Mikoto heard a creaking sound from the side.

As soon as she heard it, multiple shelves from the gun shops collapsed all at once as if they had been hit by heavy machinery.

“Wha—!?”

At that time, Mikoto remembered a documentary on tropical oceans she had seen.

More accurately, she recalled the sea anemones.

What reminded her of them were all the hands, hands, hands, hands, hands, hands, hands, hands, hands, hands, hands, hands, hands, hands!!!!!

“…!! What happened to your guns!?”

Mikoto magnetically manipulated one of the shelves that had been knocked over. She sent it sliding across the floor at high speed as if it was sliding on ice. It took out the rioters' feet knocking them over.

But that was not enough.

She then heard a metallic click behind her.

"I didn't say that because I was hoping you would bring the guns back!!"

Multiple gunshots rang out.

Mikoto dropped down her hand that was up in the air while magnetically manipulating the rebar in the ceiling. A large amount of building materials came crashing down like a shutter creating a shield against the bullets.

An unpleasant sweat appeared over Mikoto's body.

There were some rioters as well as Mikoto along the path where the bullets would have gone. They truly were just a gathering of strangers, so they did not care about friendly fire.

She could not continue stopped in one place.

She had to stop the guns from being spread out from that gun shop area, but getting swallowed up by the waves of people would not help anything.

"…!!"

Mikoto gritted her back teeth and moved swiftly. She fired a few more flashes and roars in the place of stun grenades and used all her speed to leave that gun shop area.

She cut across a grocery corner and into a do-it-yourself carpentry corner while a few bullets were fired nearby.

(I can't do anything if I don't neutralize their guns.)

Mikoto ducked down and ran between shelves while covering her head from the remnants of the products being blown away by the rifle bullets.

(My power can do a lot of things, but it’s easier to use by strengthening it with items gathered from the area than just using it by itself. Even its namesake, the Railgun, is like that…)

Mikoto practically slid into the corner she was headed for and grabbed the package she was going for. It was a large plastic bag about the size of a bag of rice.

(And so is my magnetic control using iron sand.)

Inside the bag were business use hand warmers.

The package held a few dozen of them and Mikoto used magnetism to rip them apart from the inside.

There were multiple types of hand warmers, but those ones had iron powder inside.

“Personally, I find iron sand easier to use, but I guess this is no time to be picky.”

She heard a sound similar to when an insect flew by her ear.

The advantage of iron sand or iron powder was that it could easily be interfered with using magnetism. If she made it vibrate at high speed, she could cut objects as if with a chainsaw and she could change it into the form of a sword, a spear, or a whip at will.

For example, it was not difficult to send out orders that caused masses smaller than a speck to be fired into the barrels or the ejection ports of the guns to tear them apart from the inside.

The sound of objects slicing through the air continued.

However, the sound was not that of rifle bullets.

It was the sound of the “bullets” of iron powder Mikoto was firing being swallowed up by the barrels of the rioter’s guns.

(This will work.)

She was now sure of that as she started to run again.

This time, she was not trying to flee. She was running in order to fight.

(This way, I can neutralize all of the guns being looted from that area! I can avoid the worst possible situation!!)

Just as she thought that, Mikoto sensitively felt an invisible current in the atmosphere. It was not a physical current of air. It was the current of emotions that had spread throughout the area and given rise to that rioting.

It had chaotically spread through that area like a giant balloon being filled to its limits within an airtight room.

However, it was now as if a gap had been created.

The flowing feelings were leaving for somewhere else. The tense feelings started to move off into the distance.

At first, Mikoto thought it was just the rioters faltering at the beginning of her counterattack.

But it was not that.

It was…

That current of emotions was…

(The target of the violence…has changed to something else?)

Mikoto frowned while continuing to destroy the rioters' rifles from the inside.

(The Russian version of the uranium ornament story had me as the ultimate villain. Why would they start to leave their primary target alone…?)

Had the violence advanced to the point where their original reasons no longer mattered? If so, it could be a major problem in its own way, but…

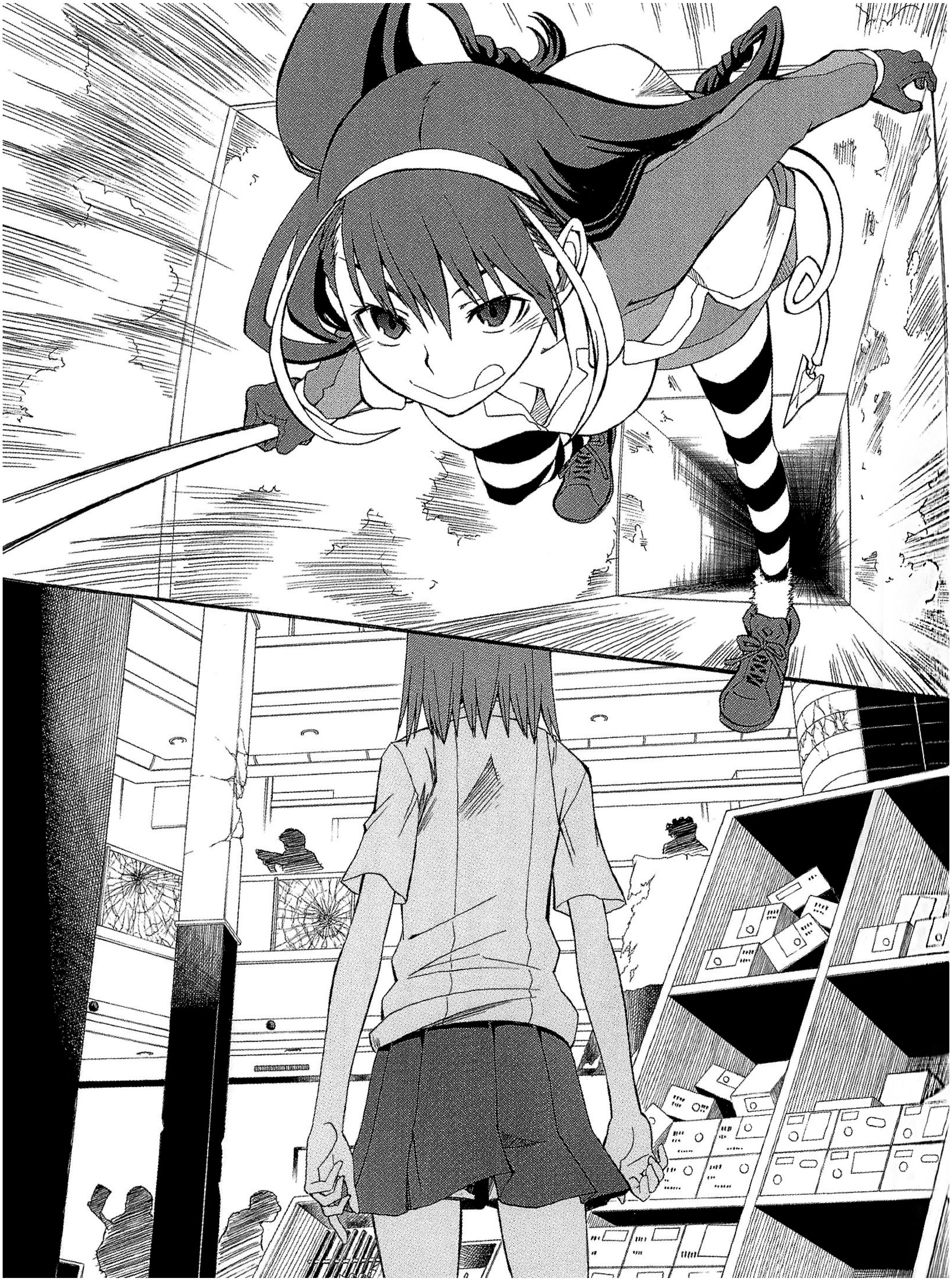
(Wait.)

Mikoto suddenly realized something.

(It’s possible this rioting is being caused by Code EIC. What if it was caused in order to stop us from reaching the center of the incident…?)

Mikoto stopped running without even realizing it.

(That would mean the target of the rioting had moved to Lessar who’s even closer to the center of it all!!)



Mikoto was not the one who was truly in the most danger.

It was Lessar who was heading for the center of Code EIC.

She had finally realized that fact, but dozens of rioters were still heading her way like an avalanche.

“Out of the way…”

Sparks crackled around Mikoto.

A large amount of iron dust writhed like a living being.

“Get out of my waaaaaaaaayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!”

Part 5

Lessar was running down a long narrow passageway.

The narrow duct had not continued on straight to her destination. There were areas where she had to come out above ground. And even if it had continued on, she would not have just headed through it. If the rioters had noticed her while she was travelling through that narrow area, she would have been trapped.

As such, Lessar had headed a certain distance through the duct and then come back up onto the first floor.

“I expected this wouldn’t be exactly easy…”

She ran at full speed without even glancing behind her.

“…but actually experiencing it is something else entirely!!”

It was like the scenes common to adventure-style action movies where the hero was chased by a giant steel ball.

However, there were dozens of men and women chasing Lessar in place of the steel ball. As they had legs, they did not need to roll, but the front row would be knocked down and trampled and then the next row would get tripped up in the same way. This made it look like she was being chased by a giant sphere made of human beings.

Lessar could feel something rather cold running down her spine while an enjoyment of the thrill somewhere in her heart caused a smile to come out on her face.

(This is bad. Very, very bad. I’m pretty sure I’ve still got a ways to go before I reach the stock market center where the center of Code EIC is.)

She could feel a vague sense of cruelty chasing after her in addition to the physical pursuers.

(It looks like my approach was detected and they divided up the rioters to have some go after me.)

Lessar had so readily split up with Mikoto because she had expected that to happen.

But suddenly Lessar saw a large group of rioters flowing out up ahead in the long passageway. She was being attacked from both sides. The knives and fire extinguishers in their hands seemed even more dangerous than guns that could kill in one shot.

(Wow! Their fingers are fidgeting around like crazy!!)

Lessar suddenly changed directions and leapt to the other side of a metal door partway down the passageway. She sealed the door with the table and other heavy objects within and was finally aware of just what kind of situation she was in. She was fed up with it.

The room was small.

It was not a place for customers. Most likely, cleaning supplies were stored inside the room. There were no other exits.

She was isolated.

But Lessar completely forgot about that kind of issue.

A greater danger lay before her eyes.

“Why…?” she muttered. “Why is there a magical bomb set up in this city of science?”

A stone big enough to just barely be held in one arm lay in the center of the room. No, technically, it was not a stone. It was a stone of charms that was created from dozens, hundreds, even thousands of parchments glued together.

(…It’s using a misinterpretation of Revelation. I guess it’s a large scale bomb that uses the sulfur fire. Well, it’s a fairly popular method to change that description to an attack method.)

Sulfur fire was of course not something physical or chemical.

In that case, it was easier to think of it as something that gave one lasting and intense pain by giving a burning pain to the skin and damage to the internal organs.

It could not be seen.

It ignored all obstacles.

And yet it was a means of attack that would definitely damage every person within range.

The bomb did not kill. Instead, it gave people incurable pain.

(If this “invisible bomb” were detonated here while there is a rumor going around of someone hidden in the city trying to detonate a nuclear bomb, it’s clear what the rioters would mistake it for with their dulled judgement.)

While looking at the sulfur fire made up of a giant mass of charms, Lessar stuck her hand into her pocket. She pulled out a card-shaped communications spiritual item made out of thick paper.

“Hello, Bayloupe?”

“What is it, Lessar?”

“I’ve found a bit of a Revelation-ish bomb. Is this you or the others’ doing by any chance?”

“How about you ask me again? I’ll give you 100 spankings.”

“Hmm, I see…”

“So are you saying there’s another cabal hidden here besides us?”

“Pretty much,” Lessar said before smacking herself on the forehead. “Achahh!”

A banging noise could continually be heard. The rioters were touchingly acting as a group in order to destroy the metal door.

“This means this whole situation is likely to get a bit more complicated…”

“Lessar,” Bayloupe cut in stopping Lessar’s thoughts. “Sorry for cutting in while you were getting heated up, but I don’t think the merits for us outweigh the risks here.”

“Even though this has spread beyond a purely science side problem and has begun to involve the magic side as well?”

“That would be a job for the official groups like Necessarius. It does not fit our goal. There is some kind of plan being carried out in this city and some magicians besides us may be involved, but there is no need for us to clean up for them. There are no merits to match the risks, so we need to quickly retreat.”

“…I’m guessing this means I can’t expect any reinforcements.”

“Even if we save the people in this city, it will not benefit us in any way.”

“Then I have no choice,” said Lessar admitting her colleague was right. “Bayloupe.”

“What?”

“Let’s have a real fight once this is over. You can use your Gjallarhorn or whatever else you want.”

Having said what she had to say, Lessar cut off the connection.

She did a general analysis of the sulfur fire’s construction by sight.

(…The construction itself is simple, but the amount will make dismantling it take some time. It looks like it’ll take between 15 and 30 minutes.)

She heard a great thud coming from the metal door. The door was beginning to dent inwards.

(The problem is that they don’t look like they’re going to give me that much time.)

But she could not just leave it alone and wait for it to detonate either.

Lessar pulled out a few Nihon Daruma “souvenirs” from her pocket. She smeared a yellow chemical on her thumb, muttered a spell under her breath, and then traced her thumb across one of the charms making up the stone-like object.

The charm fell off like a dried leaf.

(I estimate there are about 30,000 of them. I’ve simplified the dismantling ceremony down as much as possible, but I still may not make it in time.)

As Lessar’s fingers raced along, the charms peeled off one by one.

However, she was indeed going to be too slow.

A violent din rang from the metal door clearly declaring her time limit. The door was already bent and multiple pairs of eyes could be seen peering through the gap.

She guessed the straining sound she heard was coming from the hinges.

Suddenly, an L-shaped crowbar stabbed through the gap between the door and the wall. With a cracking noise, the gap started to widen due to the principle of leverage.

(Not good…!!)

The door was not going to last.

If the rioters came pouring in before she had dismantled the sulfur fire, all of the civilians in the area would take the full brunt of the magical bomb.

Lessar was thinking that, but…

Suddenly, a gunshot rang out and the crowbar was knocked away.

The gunshot had not come from outside the door. It had clearly come from within the room. But there was no one inside the room besides Lessar.

Lessar turned toward the source of the noise in shock.

“…Above?”

“Moving through ducts is a basic part of action movies.”

A square portion of the ceiling was removed and the upper half of a woman appeared upside down through it. They were in a Russian facility but the handgun the woman held was a foreign gun, so it may have been a favorite of hers.

(So this city has ducts running through both above and below.)

“Who are you?”

“I am Enirya G. Algonskaya of the security guards,” said the redheaded woman giving a simple introduction. “I rushed over here thinking Misaka Mikoto was here, but it looks like I was wrong. At any rate, it seems you’re trapped here. I’ll protect you, so grab onto my hand.”

“I’d really, really like to do so, but…”

“?”

“Do you know what this is I’m dismantling? Nn, I guess you wouldn’t. Well… just think of it like a time bomb filled with a liquid explosive. If I just leave it here, those vigorous rioters will be completely blown way.”

“A bomb? …God damn it,” Enirya cursed.

She pulled her upper body back inside the duct and then dropped down into the small room right side up.

“Do you have the skills to dismantle it? Since you’re already touching it, I sure as hell hope you’re a specialist.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. More importantly…”

A great din started coming from the metal door once more.

“Could you do something about them?”

“I’ll do my best.”

Enirya stuck the barrel of her gun into the gap between the door and the wall and pulled the trigger without hesitating. Dry gunshots rang out and a sense of faltering could be sensed from the other side.

“How long is it going to take to dismantle that thing!?”

“Fifteen minutes if we’re lucky. Thirty if we’re not.”

Even as Lessar said that, her hands were sending charm after charm falling from the stone-like mass. The great amount of fallen parchments looked like a pile of feathers.

Enirya fired through the gap in the door and seemed to be contacting someone over her radio. She was likely sending a security guard unit to the passageway outside the door. But would they make it in time? Could they prepare enough strength to restrain the group of people who had become a mass of cruelty?

Suddenly, a new grinding sound became audible.

It was coming from the other side of the wall.

The wall opposite the door.

“Uuh… I have a very bad feeling about what that means.”

“?”

“You’re one of the security guards that was there back then, right? Then you should recognize that sound. Don’t you remember hearing that when the remote controlled equipment showed up?”

“That’s the sound of…treads…?”

Enirya stopped firing and turned around toward the opposite wall.

Immediately afterwards, the heavy equipment plowed through the reinforced concrete wall and appeared amid a cloud of dust.

It was a small snowplow.

This time it was not equipped with a light machine gun and it had no explosives on it. It was simply being driven by one of the enraged rioters.

Lessar and Enirya jumped to the walls on the left and right as the snowplow cut through the center. It plowed through the table and metal door on the other side of the room and continued into the passageway filled with rioters.

Even so, the next noise was that of cheering.

The rioters were letting out joyous voices at the fact that they could resume their violence now that the door was out of their way.

Enirya fired a few shots, but it was meaningless.

Countless rioters charged in through the two holes opened up in the walls.

Lessar did not stop her dismantling job and she was forced to wrap her arms around the bomb as if she were trying to protect it.

She felt her throat dry up, but there was nowhere left to flee.

She would be swallowed up.

It was pointless to ask Enirya for help. The woman was about to disappear amidst the crowd just as she was.

Arms…

Legs…

They both flew at her and pain exploded just beneath her skin. Before the feeling could disappear, the next strike would come. And the next, and the next, and the next. The number of blows accumulated in no time at all. She tried to ball up and protect her organs as much as possible, but she wasn’t sure how effective her efforts were. She was saved by the fact that the rioters were packed in too tightly, so they did not have room to aim their guns at her. However, being driven closer and closer to death by their bare hands was a hell of its own.

The situation may have been truly bad.

Lessar noticed an iron-like flavor welling up from deep in her throat. She could tell her thoughts were growing dull. Her pain exceeded a certain level and she began to feel nothing more than a vague heat.

(…Fire…)

That thought vaguely entered her head.

(Sulfur…fire…)

The mass she was holding in her hands fell to pieces. The final explosion-causing charm lost its effects and slipped from her hands.

With even her pain in a vague state, Lessar smiled slightly.

And then something flew by at high speed piercing through the walls on the left and the right that had not yet been destroyed.

It ripped through the air at three times the speed of sound.

An extremely tiny projectile pierced through the wall at a point almost at the ceiling. This smashed the entire wall spreading pieces of concrete everywhere.

A glowing orange line remained burned in the retinas of everyone there.

Shortly afterwards, the rioters crowded inside that small space were blown away as if it were an afterthought. Some were hit by the shockwave and some were hit by the whirling concrete fragments. As if that raging violence had been overwritten by an even more sublime violence, the situation was completely turned around in an instant.

A low rumbling noise could be heard.

With the four walls destroyed, the now unsupported ceiling began to collapse.

The rioters that could still move frantically ran from the room, but the tragedy they were expecting did not occur.

Ignoring gravity, the concrete ceiling floated in midair.

It was as if magnetism were being manipulated.

“…Chehh. You stole the best part,” Lessar muttered while still collapsed on the ground.

Enirya looked over in the direction Lessar was looking and discovered who the “ruler” was.

“Misaka…Mikoto…”

Enirya spat out some saliva mixed with blood and adjusted her grip on her handgun with bloody hands. The incessant violence had left her in a situation where she could not even stand up, but she still managed to hold her right arm out.

Mikoto’s expression did not change despite having the gun aimed at her.

“Aren’t you pointing that at the wrong person?”

“N...no. You are the…highest priority.”

Her hand was trembling, but there was a piercing light in her eyes.

Amid the strange silence, Enirya stared through her gun sight at the suspect and asked a question.

“Misaka…Mikoto. Are you…the leader…behind this…incident?”

Mikoto smiled slightly upon hearing the question.

And then she unhesitatingly responded.

Her response seemed to be directed not just at Enirya but at all the rioters there as well.

“Do you really think that person would come here to save a security guard?” This time, Mikoto asked a question. “Do you have any ideas who could be behind this?”

“That is…what I am currently…investigating. It’s not just…you. I am… thoroughly investigating…every single…suspicious person.”

Her strength must have been at its limit.

After saying that, Enirya’s right hand fell to the floor. It seemed she had lost consciousness.

Silence fell over the room.

Bluish-white sparks flew from Mikoto’s bangs destroying that silence,

“…I am really pissed right now.”

She did not run away. She headed straight into the rioters.

She did it because she knew it was right.

She did not hesitate.

“I am not trying to kill any of you as I head forward, but make sure not to screw up and get yourselves killed.”

Part 6

Enirya woke up to a stabbing pain.

It was different from the feeling before that could not be distinguished from heat.

She realized it was due to disinfectant and tried to get up from the floor.

“You should stay still,” said a fellow security guard.

“Where…am I?” Enirya said moving her lips that were covered in dried blood.

From the looks of things, she was not very far away from the place where she had been attacked by the rioters. There were a few security guards armed with guns stationed in the long, narrow passageway.

(…What happened? Was I saved by the suppression strategy…?)

Suddenly, Enirya remembered what had actually happened.

Just before she had passed out someone other than the security guards had shown up.

Enirya asked for an explanation of the situation while half-grabbing her colleague’s collar.

“What happened?”

“It was Misaka Mikoto.”

“What happened to that primary suspect!? She was here before, right!?”

But her colleague shook his head.

"I don't know what happened to her…"

Just because the battle ended in one place did not meant that the rioting was completely over.

After all, the disturbance had spread throughout the entire shopping mall. Things had gone beyond the level where just a strong individual like Mikoto could do anything about it. It could not be stopped without the power of a group.

"Didn't you go a little easy on that security guard?" said Lessar while she spread disinfectant on her wounds. "From how she was acting, I'm betting she's still going to bare her fangs at you."

"I don't need to worry about that. If she truly is trying to find who is behind this incident, she is not my enemy even if she does get in my way." After saying that, Mikoto changed the subject. "But what kind of people are the higher ups of the shopping mall?"

"I'm sure they didn't want this much damage. It's possible they don't have many cards left to play. They may have started a wildfire with a cigarette butt and now they aren't able to put it out."

"They have control of Code EIC and they can send out any information they want, right? …In that case, wouldn't they be able to use the news and other things to control the scale and flow of the rioting?"

"The people don't know about Code EIC. It does not send out orders that people are obligated to follow. Instead, it adjusts the direction they head in without them realizing it. If they tried to forcibly change the direction of the people, there's a danger that the people would notice the inconsistency. If that happened, where do you think the people's anger would turn? Humans are easily deceived, but a human that enjoys being deceived is a rare thing indeed."

Lessar led Mikoto to an underground facility within the shopping mall.

Inside were many booths divided by transparent partitions made of reinforced glass. In addition to the normal screens and monitors, the walls, ceiling, and other surfaces were all monitors for the Semipublic AR. The entire space was filled with flowing numbers. The size of the area was around the size of small concert hall. The conspicuous facility was constructed out of straight lines and was colored mainly a pale blue.

“This is like the color scheme of a men’s bathroom,” Lessar commented letting her troubling impression leak out.

Mikoto ignored her.

“So this is it?”

“As I said before, this is the stock market center that centers on the tenant-owned stores within the shopping mall. The stocks for all of the companies in the city are handled here. It’s a market that is connected to the entire world through the network. It’s listed in the shopping mall’s pamphlet as one of the sightseeing spots. It suggests that one experiences its ‘real’ presence.”

When she looked closer, Mikoto noticed that here was a space up high on the wall that circled around the entire area. It may have been similar to how foreigners loved seeing the fish markets in Japan.

Mikoto hung her head down as she thought.

“So there’s a giant computer that can carry out massive amounts of calculations and a large scale server that can exchange data on trading from all over the world with no lag…”

“If the higher ups wanted to extend Code EIC beyond the shopping mall, there’s no better facility for it, right?”

“I know that, but…”

Mikoto looked around.

On the floor, the walls, the ceiling, the partitions, the monitors, the screens, and everything else, there were tons of dizzyingly tiny numbers scrolling across and curving graphs moving up and down ever so slightly. Investors from all over the world would either rejoice or worry based on the changes in those numbers. Depending on the situation, some would hang themselves and some would make baths of banknotes.

But…

Despite the intense changes in the numbers, Mikoto could not detect a single person inside that stock market center. The numbers continued to change, so the trading could not be over. And even if the trading for the day was over, there would have to have been at least one guard.

“What is going on? Why are there no businessmen or operators here?”

“I dunno. They may have left because the city lost functionality. Or they may have run off to find shelter because they knew we were coming.”

“But the shopping mall seems to need Code EIC. Wouldn’t they normally try to oppose us?”

“Maybe there’s some sub system. Or maybe they’re preparing some way to interfere remotely.”

“Well, just speculating isn’t going to solve anything.”

Mikoto looked up at the giant computer in the center of the facility.

Its area alone was greater than 8 school classrooms and its height was on par with a three story building. Because it was installed in the center, the entire facility was built in a donut shape.

“Then I’m going to get all the information I can. We can think this through once we have all the materials.”

Lessar moved away from Mikoto and started to investigate the area.

Mikoto reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out a PDA.

As she was in one of Academy City’s cooperative institutions, they used the same type of connector. She connected the PDA to the giant computer with a cable and started “peeking” inside.

(…Chehh. The calculation area used for the stock trading only takes up a third of it. I guess the rest is related to Code EIC. It reads people’s actions through all the security cameras and estimates what their feelings are. Then it automatically creates a news source that uses the best timing to spread the rumor in waves. It controls people as a mass rather than as individuals…)

She had found the program related to Code EIC, but she did not touch it because she had no manual to tell her if simply shutting it down would be fine or if it would bring even more chaos.

She focused on finding the details of whatever the shopping mall's higher ups were planning.

After all, they may have brought a nuclear weapon into Academy City.

(They used Code EIC to spread the urban legend of the uranium ornament, so what they are planning to do in Academy City and the details of the incident using the urban legend as its motif may be inside this computer.)

Mikoto used the PDA to search through the massive storage areas of the computer, but her fingers finally stopped moving.

She had found it.

"Concerning the Fluctuation in the Value of Scientific Information once Academy City is Destroyed"

It was generally what Mikoto and Lessar had predicted.

If Academy City was destroyed and it could no longer function as the headquarters of the scientific world, the quality of the world's "cutting edge science" would drop drastically. If that happened, companies and organizations throughout the world would see great value in the fragmentary knowledge the shopping mall had.

If psychic power development could be successfully created from that information, that was fine. And even if that did not happen and technology branching off from what supported psychic powers was developed instead, it was still fine as long as it made a profit.

The loss of Academy City would of course be a major blow to the world, but it was not as if all of humanity would be immediately destroyed.

After all, Academy City had been hiding its cutting edge technology that entire time. Even if that unreleased technology that no one else knew about was lost, the rest of the world would still be able to live their lives.

Of course, there would be obvious damage when it came to the financial and economic worlds, but the shopping mall was an expert in those fields. They could keep their damages to a minimum and rearrange the network of the market in the confusion in a way advantageous for themselves.

They would create a business model.

That was what the shopping mall was trying to do.

The problem was how they were planning to destroy Academy City…

(…Means of using a Solntse hydrogen bomb?)

Mikoto read those words and then started to feel dizzy.

What was all that about a uranium ornament?

Things had gone beyond the level of mere nuclear fission.

“…The primary plan is to deploy a Solntse within Academy City and then activate a timed detonator. It will detonate after the spies escape.”

That must have been the true identity those attackers armed with ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifles that Shirai had run into.

“If the primary plan runs into problems, we will immediately switch to the secondary plan. That decision does not need to be discussed with the spies carrying out the primary plan. If we decide it is necessary, we will switch over.”

A chill ran down her spine.

The lack of people in the stock market center meaningfully pressed on Mikoto’s chest.

“The secondary plan is…”

After reading that far, Mikoto frowned.

She could not find any text on the secondary plan. It just said that it would only be shown to those with the authority to view it.

(Is there any more text? Or is the rest only told by mouth in order to leave no records?)

She could not make a judgment based on only the information she had.

Mikoto gave up on that report and looked through the giant computer for another file.

As expected, she could not find anything explaining the secondary plan, but she found a few pieces of reference data that supplemented that unseen center. She looked through quite a few encrypted files and a common item began to show itself.

(A modified MIG-21…?)

It seemed to be the designation of a Russian aircraft.

Mikoto looked through one of the reference files.

The file had photos and videos in it.

(It's a fighter that was originally developed during the cold war. Its defining characteristic is how oddly low the cost for one is. Its functionality can be summed up in the term "old model".)

Mikoto scanned through the data being displayed on the PDA.

(At the end of the cold war, most of the Soviet weapons were sold at very low prices and the MIG-21 was no exception. One of them has a value of 30,000 dollars. When compared to the American fighters that cost 100,000,000 dollars each, it is an extremely cheap fighter that can be obtained by almost anyone.)

All of that had been the specs of the normal MIG-21.

The higher ups of the shopping mall had purchased one due to its low price and how easy it was to obtain one. They had then independently modified it.

They had modified it to fill a role in their current plan.

Mikoto opened the diagram for the modified fighter and scanned through the desired specs.

That time, she truly thought she had become anemic.

It said the following:

Added suspension for a nuclear weapon.

Modifications to hold a Solntse.

Mikoto concluded that it would be used to force a detonation if the primary plan were to fail.

Part 7

Lessar lightly clenched her fist and knocked on the wall with the back of her hand.

She slowly moved along tapping accurately along at even intervals.

Lessar listened to the sound it made as she moved along the well, but she eventually came to a stop.

The noise had changed.

The sound was weak. It was as if the impact of her knock was escaping on the other side of a thin wall.

Lessar’s mouth loosened and she smashed the glass case on the wall with her elbow. Inside was an axe in case of emergency. That kind of thing may have been rare in Japan, but overseas they were as common as fire extinguishers.

She grabbed the axe and unhesitatingly struck the wall.

Sparks flew from the Semipublic AR screen, but Lessar paid them no heed. She swung the axe three or four more times. With a cracking noise, the wall finally collapsed in the other direction. It was more like it had been knocked down by a blunt object than like it had been sliced by the axe.

“Oh, it was a sliding door. And I was pushing it forward,” muttered Lessar as she tossed the axe to the side.

It probably had a strict electronic lock, but she did not care.

She stepped inside.

She smelled a nostalgic scent.

The dimly lit area seemed to be a straight passageway. It was not clear whether it led to some kind of secret facility or was just an escape route. Lessar grinned and headed further inside.

The passageway turned at a right angle.

“This is…?”

Just as she peered around the corner, she heard Mikoto shouting after her from within the stock market center.

“Wait! Come here a second!! I’ve found some amazing data.”

“Oh, that sounds important.”

“It looks like they’ve given an old fighter the ability to hold a nuclear weapon!! What about you? Did you find anything!?”

“No.” Lessar peered around the corner of the passageway once more. “There’s nothing here. I’ll be right there.”

(…Well, I guess it’s for the best to tell her that.)

Around that corner was another long and straight passageway. Inside that passageway were 9 headless bodies of people that had been killed before they managed to get to the end of the passageway.

All the corpses were wearing high class suits that one would never see on a salaryman. Hanging from the remnants of their necks were ID cards with the highest rank. The ID photos on the cards smiled eerily as if in place of the heads that had been removed and taken away.

The walls, the floor, and the ceiling.

Fresh blood was spread all over like part of a bad joke.

The higher ups were dead.

And the wounds were much too clean to have been done by the rioters those higher ups had created.

But Lessar was not especially concerned by the bodies themselves.

She was concerned by the symbol on the necks.

(…The sword emblem. And since the scroll ornamentation is there too, it must be related to St. Paul.)

“That’s in terrible taste,” Lessar muttered.

(The symbol of a patron saint often designates where that patron saint received persecution such as a gouged out eyeball or a severed breast. But using the emblem of the decapitated St. Paul to behead another… That just reeks of modern Western magic that loves secret tricks.)

But in that case, something inexplicable came to the surface.

Something clearly different had been mixed in with that incident that had progressed based on scientific means.

The other set of laws known as magic had been mixed in.

And…

(Even if the higher ups have been slaughtered, the plan involving a nuke is still continuing.)

Those gears that had remained hanging down continued to turn, so the unit carrying it out would not be stopped easily. At the very least, the option of having an order sent out that would end it all peaceably had disappeared.

(So what idiot is continuing this plan?)

Lessar smiled thinly as she turned around and headed back through the passageway toward Mikoto.

“It looks like this has gotten a bit more interesting.”

Chapter 7

Part 1

An Anti-Skill group wearing powered suits for work in nuclear facilities had begun the mopping up operation in Academy City.

The terrorists were armed with ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifles and a large amount of detectors. Essentially, they had special electromagnetic firearms that could penetrate all forms of cover and would fatally destroy human cells and they had explosives that used those firearms.

The means of defense in a modern gunfight was not to see the bullet and evade it. Instead, it was to hide yourself behind something that functioned as a shield. As such, the ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifles that could penetrate any kind of cover were quite a threat.

However, as long as you defended yourself with something that could completely block the ultra high frequency electromagnetic waves, you could turn the situation around.

Shirai Kuroko spoke into her cell phone.

“Onee-sama. The soldiers wearing lead armor have ended the firefight. They are fine. The suppression is complete. There is no sign of the nuke exploding. It seems they had almost finished putting it together, but luckily the timer was still incomplete. …That was the report I received.”

“Wait, Kuroko!! Don’t hang up!!”

“Onee-sama?”

“It seems the Russian shopping mall had a secondary plan in case the nuclear bomb on the timer failed. They have likely already switched over to that plan. You need to inform Anti-Skill!!”

Mikoto then seemed to hesitate.

But then she continued on with resolve.

“A fighter loaded with a hydrogen bomb is headed from Russia to Academy City. If the air defense unit does not head out immediately, it will be dropped right on top of you!!”

Three old style fighters cut across the Sea of Japan at a point just barely above the waves. They were flying that low in order to lower the odds of being seen on radar as much as possible. However, that was not enough to completely deceive an air surveillance network. If it was, no one would spend so much money developing stealth technology.

“Klyuch Samolyot to all crafts. I have detected multiple radar waves. The JSDF has likely caught sight of us on their wide-area radar. This will not be so easy from now on.”

“Prisluga Samolyot to Klyuch Samolyot. They are not idiots. They would have already noticed us. For diplomatic reasons, they were just waiting until we were past Russian waters.”

“Nochi Samolyot to all crafts. Russia will begin taking action soon, too. I’m more worried about having Sukhoi’s coming up behind us.”

“Klyuch Samolyot to all crafts. Academy City is our greatest enemy. They will soon realize what we are trying to do. This is the critical moment.”

There was no point in flying so low any longer.

The three old style fighters slowly raised their altitude, threw off the caution they had been flying with before, and accelerated to full speed.

They were heading for the capital of Japan, Tokyo.

Those fighters that had the ability to hold a nuclear weapon were headed for the center of the science side, Academy City.

Mikoto paced about in the stock market center beneath the shopping mall. She was not moving her legs in order to reach a destination. Instead, she was merely trying to suppress her troubled nerves.

“…We reached the center of Code EIC, but the equipment is just the equipment. We didn’t find the person who was controlling it, so we can’t stop the shopping mall’s plan.”

Mikoto was muttering in order to put together her own thoughts, but Lessar was listening in.

(Yes, I generally agree with that, but…)

Lessar recalled what she had seen deep in that hidden passageway.

(The problem is that everyone in the group that seems to have been behind all this was decapitated. And they were killed magically. So…who has control of this plan now?)

Various expectations had crossed paths and the final plan was continuing on.

The Solntse hydrogen bomb.

That weapon held such ridiculous destructive power and it was the truly horrible joker being used in that plan.

Part 2

“I have a suggestion,” Lessar said to Mikoto as the other girl thought.

Mikoto looked puzzled.

“What is this all of a sudden?”

“If the modified MIG-21 continues at a normal rate, it will reach the center of Academy City in less than an hour. We cannot worry about our appearance right now. We need to find the person who is controlling this plan.”

“And?”

“The destructive force of the Solntse is massive, so the higher ups must have prepared a system to prevent the pilot from betraying them. Simply put, the bomb will not detonate if the pilot merely drops it. After the pilot drops it, the higher ups will send out a detonation signal. I’m betting a system like that has been built in,” Lessar explained. “Otherwise, there is a risk of the pilot betraying the higher ups and dropping a Solntse on the shopping mall. And if there is a unit of those old fighters, they could even drop one here and then run off with the rest once any pursuers have been utterly eliminated.”

Mikoto started to nod in agreement, but…

(…Huh?)

Something bothered her.

However, she could not get a proper grasp of what exactly it was.

Meanwhile, Lessar had continued speaking.

“In other words, even if they manage to get past the air defenses of Academy City and the JSDF, the dropped Solntse will not detonate as long as the detonation signal is not sent out.”

“In that case, there’s something we can do other than sitting here twiddling our thumbs.”

“Yes, we can find and capture whoever is controlling this plan.”

As Lessar spoke, she tossed something from between her fingers.

The object that spun through the air like a Frisbee in Mikoto’s direction was a single ID card.

“This is…?”

“I found it back in that passageway. That card holds authorization of the highest rank. If we search through the areas and data surrounding that person, we can get an idea of these invisible higher ups’ identities. We may even be able to figure out where their hiding places are.”

She had not lied.

But she had left out the little fact that “whoever is controlling this plan” may have changed from being the higher ups to being some third party.

Part 3

The ID card had its owner’s name, picture, position, and authorized rank on it.

“The name and picture may be real, but the position is probably a fake. I doubt he would just have a card saying ‘Secret Organization’ hanging from his neck. We probably won’t find their hiding places by following that position.”

“That doesn’t matter. We can just use a different opening.”

“?”

“Having the highest rank has worked against them. Even in a shopping mall this huge, there aren’t that many areas restricted to that level. So if you open a map…”

Mikoto operated the Semipublic AR to automatically color code the security levels of the areas on the map.

The highest rank was red.

Only 5 areas were filled in with that color.

“See? He went to and from one of them frequently, so there should be some information left there. It’s possible he’s hiding there himself.”

When they actually went there, they found a small door at the end of a narrow passageway rather than something more like the door to a bank vault. A sign on the door said “staff only” and it just seemed like a break room for the workers from one of the shops.

“Is this the place?”

“Yes, but normally I would think the security guards would be stationed around here. Or I suppose it could be a separate unit wearing normal clothes in order to keep even the security guards from knowing about this.”

“According to a report from Bayloupe and Lancis, the riots are in a bit of a lull, but it is still a bit of a problem.”

When Mikoto slid the ID card through a card reader near the knob, multiple dull metallic noises rang out. The door automatically opened inwards and it became apparent that it was over 1 meter thick. A rubber seal was placed around the edge of the door which likely made the door airtight when closed.

“This really does feel like a secret base.”

“Why do boys love creating this kind of atmosphere?”

As they spoke back and forth, the two girls entered the room.

The room was about as large as two classrooms, but it did not give an impression of spaciousness. Something like bookshelves were packed into the room. They were actually steel racks that had a great number of hard disks on them instead of books.

“Offline storage…” Mikoto looked around. “Code EIC is constantly connected to the network, so there is a possibility of someone attacking it externally. There is a risk that the data on the hard disks could be damaged or lost. This is a standalone backup for just such a case.”

“There are also paper documents strewn about.”

“He either was in the habit of printing out the data to check it or he just took all of the important data no one else should see and threw it in here. Either way, it’s more convenient for us.”

Mikoto and Lessar started investigating the room. Mikoto checked the stored data and Lessar checked the paper documents.

(I know the owner of this place is already dead, but…)

Lessar thought to herself while glancing over at Mikoto who was operating the Semipublic AR.

(I don’t think the magician who created those decapitated corpses is just an outsider. I can accept that an outsider could have found the secret passageway, but this magician managed to open and close the door with the proper science side method. …There’s a good chance he or she had a connection from the beginning.)

In that case, what she had to focus on was…

(If this is where the secret data is stored, then some data on the magician connected to the higher ups of the shopping mall may remain. I have to use that information to pursue this magician.)

“…This is it.”

After battling with the piles of paper for a bit, Lessar pulled out a large envelope. Inside were a single photograph and a few sheets of copy paper. It was a background investigation carried out by a detective agency.

(The shopping mall most likely did its own investigation into how safe it was to join forces with this person.)

The photo and name were clear enough, but the rest was strange for the most part. There just was no consistency in the text. For example, one page listed the person as staying at one hotel and the next page listed a different hotel.

Lessar snickered.

The person may have been protected by a spell that allowed others to accept mismatched reports without finding it odd.

But the effects had worn off once the reports had been turned to digital data.

As a result, the report had displayed the mismatched information as mismatched and the shopping mall had deemed the person as possibly dangerous.

Not taking into account the alteration of information from analog to digital was a common mistake. But there were some things that were difficult to handle when it came to getting that close to the science side.

(…Her name is Caliche I. Niknosh. Well, the name is a bit doubtful, but she failed with the photo. From the small ornaments and the traces left on the headless bodies, it’s clear she’s some failed member of the Russian Orthodox Church. But…)

As Lessar thought to herself, she glanced over at Mikoto.

The girl seemed to be quite something as far as Academy City was concerned, but that did not make it okay to carelessly have her take part in a magic side incident. Lessar was not someone whose job it was to keep the peace, but because she was not bound by any strict rules, she knew quite well how far one could slip from the proper path if one forgot those vague manners.

Caliche who had decapitated the higher ups was a good example of that.

“I have a suggestion.”

“Again?”

“Let’s split up,” Lessar said with a grin. “To be honest, searching through this ridiculous amount of data is more your kind of thing. I don’t feel like I can help all that much. Academy City will be in a serious pinch soon, so I think it would be better if I actually did something rather than sitting around here.”

“Well, I’d be glad if you could go help somehow, but do you have any actual ideas?”

“No, if I did, I would have told you about it.”

“…I see. Well, go patrol around or something then.”

“While I’m out, I think I’ll go eat some of the free samples at one of the grocery stores,” Lessar said offhand as she started to leave the room.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“If you find something, don’t go charging off on your own. Having done that before, I can tell you that it isn’t very much fun. If you find a clue, come back here first, okay?”

“…”

For an instant, Lessar had the expression of someone taken off guard.

But an instant later she had the same mischievous smile as usual.

“Understood.”

After that response, she left the room.

(What a pain. Is there anyone who can act solely out of self preservation after hearing that?)

Lessar sighed and thought about what she was about to do.

The names of a few of the major Russian magic cabals came to her mind. Mikoto was still continuing her science side investigation, but she would likely reach a dead end that way. From there on, Lessar had to take the front line. She mentally arranged what she had to do.

And of course, she would be using the methods of the magic side.

Part 4

Lessar first headed for a grocery corner.

The riots had calmed down a bit, but the after effects could still be seen. A lot of the shelves were knocked over, the number of products was down significantly, and a lot of what was left had been trampled underfoot. Lessar did not see any workers. They had likely decided that their pay did not match the risks.

She wandered around a place that had once had shelves lined with herbs and spices. She crouched down and looked through the small bottles on the floor.

"Oh, sage and parsley…and here's turmeric. Found sanshou and chili peppers, too. With these, I may be able to reduce my work."

Lessar gathered up a few products and a thought came to her.

"How ironic. The side trying to keep everyone from rioting is now stealing to achieve their goal."

However, Lessar showed no hesitation in taking the spices without paying.

That showed that she was not on the side that kept the peace.

Lessar did not stand back up. While still crouching down, she opened the bottles of spices. She then moved her arm in a large circle drawing a circle on the floor about the size of a manhole.

Just like in many other cultures, Norse women used plants. Highly dangerous magical plants as well as herbs and spices sold at normal stores could be used as magical tools by them. If you had the proper knowledge, magical materials could be gathered at a convenience store.

"Well, I'm sure that girl and her serious science brain (ha) would rationalize it as autosuggestion concerning folk remedies or something ridiculous like that."

Lessar waved the tail that extended from within her miniskirt. She liked using spells based on Norse mythology that was purposefully distorted by Christianity. By using that demonic form, she could control phenomena that could not occur within standard Norse mythology.

As she thought through that, Lessar drew a few more shapes inside the circle of spices.

(This is a lot easier when you mix in Christianity. After all, I can just use the modern alphabet rather than having to translate every little thing into ancient runes. Each individual letter of the alphabet does not have complex meaning to it, so you can make a magic circle just by lining up the needed terms. You don’t have to worry about the symbols and meanings of different letters ending up in some strange conflict that stains them and causes the circle to fail.)

Lessar completed her occult magic circle and then placed her index finger on the edge of the circle.

Immediately afterwards, bluish-white flames appeared in the place her finger had touched. As if they were spreading across lines of oil, the flames spread across the complex magic circle. There was no change in Lessar’s expression. The end of her index finger was in the bluish-white flames, but it did not feel any heat.

“Now then.” Lessar stared into the center of the magic circle as if she were enjoying herself. “I’ve opened a point of contact to the outside, so how will she react?”

In the next instant, she removed her finger from the magic circle.

It was not because she finally started to feel the heat.

An ice knife appeared out of thin air stabbing into the center of the magic circle and sending the flames and spices flying in every direction.

It was a clearly defensive action.

If she had removed her finger even an instant later, her finger would have been lost along with the magic circle.

But Lessar’s smile only grew.

She held the smile of someone who had just seen a second 7 line up on a slot machine.

“Yes, that was your only choice!!” She slowly stood up. “After all, I was about to send a message to Russia’s five main magic cabals saying that a magician was taking actions within their turf. And your name and photo would have been transmitted along with the message!! You knew I could trace your location from it, but you still had to magically interfere!!”

Lessar unhesitatingly started running.

The spices had been blown away by the defensive action…or so it had looked. In reality, they were leading the way to the attacker’s location as if they were a line of iron sand caught in a line of magnetism.

(The trace was a success!! I’m sure the attacker noticed it, but while she is mixed in with the crowds is best. I can’t miss her at this distance!!)

Lessar ran through the grocery corner and charged into a back passageway through an open door for workers. An ice knife flew at her at high speed from around a corner in the twisting passageway, but Lessar evaded it by twisting her upper body.

The blade passed by only a few millimeters from her skin, but Lessar’s expression showed no fear.

Her personality focused on the positive more than the negative which was not an aspect that made her well-liked by her comrades such as Bayloupe and Lancis.

The positive in that situation was…

(She’s close.)

As Lessar poured strength into her legs, she ran through the narrow passageway.

(If not, she would not have panicked and tried to stop me like that!!)

After heading around the next corner, she saw the back of a fleeing woman.

It was Caliche I. Niknosh.

(Bingo!! Suspicious people always do suspicious things!!)

She did not shout out anything stupid like “wait”.

That kind of warning more accurately meant, “wait if you don’t want to die”. It would have no effect on someone already in a kill or be killed position.

As such, Lessar drew as much oxygen into her lungs as she could and ran at full speed.

She almost felt like she could hear her footsteps coming from behind her.

The woman was about 30 to 50 meters ahead.

Assuming there was no humorous pitfall, Lessar would not lose her.

She heard a loud noise.

Lessar sensed that it was the sound of a door being thrown open and she stepped through it as if sneaking through the gap in the swaying door.

She was now outdoors.

The area seemed to be a business parking lot for the delivery of materials. The entire area was flat. Streetlights were lined up at even intervals. Other than that, there was nothing there. Caliche was already about to pass beyond the short trees surrounding the parking lot, but Lessar showed no sign of worry.

At some point, a spear-like object had appeared in her hand.

It was the steel glove.

Four blades were attached to the end of the weapon and it looked a bit like a grabber arm.

Lessar used those blade fingers to grab a small cloth bag. Inside the bag were the spices from before blended at a set ratio.

With the bag hanging from the end, Lessar used both hands to swing around the long narrow weapon above her head.

She was using what was likely humanity’s oldest projectile weapon which had been used to increase the strength beyond that of one’s own arm strength before the invention of the bow.

The oldest form would have had a string or belt put in a U-shape with a fist-sized rock inside that used centrifugal force to fire the rock. But in later times, simplification plus the use of leverage had developed it into a device similar to a lacrosse stick that was a cup attached to the end of a stick.

(Three times…no five times around should be enough…!!)

Lessar gradually lowered the axis of the rotation above her head until she was swinging it similarly to the hammer throw. Once she had the necessary amount of centrifugal force, she opened the four blades that held the spice bag.

The small bag flew in a high arc and headed for its target from above.

It flew more like a grenade than a bullet.

And its actual effects were more like a grenade as well.

Most likely, Caliche had noticed the projectile coming her way. As a few ice knifes appeared out of thin air, she had likely intended to shoot it down.

But it was too late.

Before the woman could do anything, the string holding the bag closed came undone, so the result would have been the same whether the bag was attacked or not.

With the slight sound of something bursting, the spices inside spread through the air. They floated around according to set laws and created a complex magic circle all at once.

Lessar then moved her thumb horizontally and spoke quietly.

“Fire of the right and water of the back, mix the colors of your directions with the wind.”

That was a means of using the Four Types power used by Golden-style cabals.

Following her thumb that had accurately indicated a direction without a compass, an invisible power swirled up.

“The wind of the back right that contrarily holds both the active and the passive becomes that which indicates calamity and a turning point!!”

Immediately afterwards, a flash of light exploded from the magic circle blossoming above Caliche’s head.

An explosive wind was created.

The power from above slammed the fleeing woman’s body to the ground, the short trees surrounding the parking lot cracked and broke, and sparks exploded from the pavement. The Semipublic AR on the surface was intended to have large trucks drive over it, but it had not been able to withstand Lessar’s attack.

“I hope you realize I am being merciful by calling out to you,” Lessar said as she rested the steel glove on her shoulder after grabbing a new cloth bag in its four blades.

She cut across the parking lot.

“I have used the center of Code EIC to investigate what you have been doing regarding the shopping mall. Now, how about you tell me why you have killed the higher ups and taken over their plan?”

“…”

Caliche writhed on the ground.

Her face was covered by her hair, but a faint smile could be seen on her lips.

Lessar felt a chill, but she did not have time to actually take action.

Just after a roar reached her ears, Lessar was crushed underneath a large man.

The man had fallen down from the sky and landed on top of Lessar’s small body.

It took a few seconds for her to realize that much.

The shock had shaken her head.

(Dammit…!! She wasn't alone…!?)

The man was practically sitting on top of her, but he still was not quite balanced.

(What is going on!? Where did he come from!? We're in the middle of an empty parking lot!!)

Lessar was about to shake the large man off to the side, but he raised his back and then swung down his rock-like forehead.

A dull noise exploded out from right next to her ear.

His head had fallen on the pavement nearby rather than on Lessar. He had struck down with his head hard enough that it would not have surprised her if the hard pavement had broken. When the man lifted his head, Lessar finally realized what he had been doing.

He was holding the handle of the steel glove in his mouth like a dog with a bone.

(Not good…)

Lessar then heard Caliche's voice for the first time.

"Thanks, Ivan."

She then called some other names.

"Sergei, Drag, Milly, Wengo, Marian, Sevche, Aria…everyone join in."

(Shit!!)

Lessar threw the man off of her and immediately rolled to the side.

Multiple small explosive noises came from a distance.

(On the roof!!)

Lessar looked over toward the noise and saw the bottoms of multiple feet approaching her like missiles.

Most likely, they were detonating the air beneath their feet to jump the 20 meter horizontal distance from the building’s roof to where Lessar was. They softened their landing in the same manner, but it was nothing but an explosive attack to Lessar who was beneath them.

(Tch! Can I avoid all of them!?)

As Lessar rolled, a great number of legs fell down in a straight line following her almost like bullets fired from a machine gun.

She could not escape to safety just by rolling to the side.

However, the explosions of air they used to soften their landings ended up working to her advantage. With the help of the wind they caused, Lessar’s small body managed to gain more distance than she could have normally.

As a result, the final foot landed just next to Lessar’s face.

As if she were breakdancing, Lessar used the momentum of her roll to stand up.

She had managed to avoid her enemies’ attack, but she did not have time to breathe a sigh of relief.

(Including Caliche and that large man, there are about 10 of them. And they’ve taken my steel glove.)

She looked over just in time to see the large man named Ivan throw the steel glove aside.

The large parking lot was a good place for a group to gang up on her.

“Did you realize I was leading you here?” Caliche said as she slowly approached.

Lessar pulled two or three more cloth bags from within her jacket.

“…It doesn’t look you’re going to tell me your magic name.”

“I don’t need to.”

As she spoke, Caliche lightly waved something like a long narrow spike.

Lessar finally realized that it was a ball-point pen. However, it likely did not have normal ink inside. Given the spells she had used, it most likely had holy oil in it.

Rather than a personal modernization, it seemed to be a format used by the entire cabal. The other members had also turned ball-point pens or other writing implements into spiritual items with which to construct spells.

“So just die for now.”

“Did you hear that?”

For some reason, Lessar spoke leisurely.

Caliche frowned questioningly, but Lessar just ignored her and continued speaking.

“Yes, yes, that’s right. That’s more or less it. From the quality of their spiritual items, they probably have other members in hiding providing logistical support, but I guess this sums up their actual fighting force for now. Yes, yes…well, just get to it.”

Yes, she ignored the woman.

Lessar was acting as if she was utterly ignoring the person before her and was talking on a cell phone.

Just after Caliche had that thought, she felt a sense of danger.

“You don’t mean…!!”

“Too late.”

Lessar mockingly stuck out her tongue and…

With a roar, *countless runes* appeared and unnatural green lightning struck the entire area.

The lightning was overwhelmingly different from natural lightning that came straight down from above. The thick sparks flew in an arc from the horizon and continually rained down on the parking lot.

Caliche had sensed the danger, so she had immediately taken evasive actions, but the men and women around her could not keep up. Their bodies were hit one after another and they fell to their knees before completely collapsing to the ground.

“This is my normal role. I move quickly about and act as a scout. Once we have accurate information on the enemy’s location, Bayloupe sends a highly destructive barrage from a distance. If necessary, Lancis can prevent the enemy from evading effectively by using all sorts of status altering attacks over a wide area and Floris can use her wings to recover me from deep within the enemy lines.”

The green lightning was similar to a carpet bombing, so Lessar too had to evade the arcing sparks as she spoke to Caliche.

“But Bayloupe is really overdoing this. And I could probably manage in a fight against her as long as she doesn’t use that Gjallarhorn. It may have been the right decision not to have her provide covering fire against the rioters.”

“…You…”

Lessar and Caliche faced each other amid the dancing green flashes of light.

Caliche could not hide that she was shaken, but Lessar had a belligerent smile on her face.

“Let’s keep this simple just like the lawless magicians we are.”

“Yes,” Caliche responded as if she had gotten over something.

The green electricity rained down above her head, but she did not move.

She merely raised the ball-point pen filled with holy oil and the sparks scattered in every direction.

With an odd noise, a piece of parchment appeared out of thin air.

The scrap of paper flew away like an empty cartridge and Caliche spoke as she held the spiritual item in the air.

“Let’s simply take each other out.”

Both Lessar and Caliche headed forward at the same time.

The sounds of their footsteps exploded out and the two magicians clashed at extremely close range amid the countless dancing green flashes of light.

In Lessar’s hand was a grenade-like spice bag that could create many different magical reactions.

In Caliche’s hand was the ball-point pen filled with holy oil that could freely create ice blades.

Caliche’s ice knife was faster when it came to the speed of creating a single attack.

A parchment flew up into the air like an empty cartridge and many different blades appeared.

“…!!”

Lessar avoided the knives coming for her throat just by moving her upper body and threw the cloth bag forward as she evaded.

She chanted a spell even though she would be affected as well.

“Earth of the left and water of the back, mix the colors of your directions with the wind. The wind of the back left which also indicates the passive becomes that which indicates peace and stagnation!!”

An explosive sound rang out.

However, it was different from the explosion using the sling from before. An impact something like being hit in the face by a solid airbag struck both Lessar and Caliche.

However, knowing the impact was coming or not changed how quickly each of them could take their next action.

Lessar was already moving her lips.

“Exorcism.”

She stepped further forward.

“The wind of the back left shall quickly disperse. It shall distance itself from the peace and stagnation of the wind of the back left and instead call in calamity and a turning point!!”

She struck her clenched fist forward.

It looked less like Lessar’s small body’s strength was bringing her forward and more like her and Caliche’s bodies were being drawn together by powerful magnetism.

Of course, Caliche had no way to avoid if they were being drawn in towards each other.

However…

“Too slow.”

Along with Caliche’s words, an upside down guillotine blade appeared on the ground.

The blade was about the size of a drawing board and it blocked the path of Lessar’s fist like a metal shutter.

As a clanging noise rang out, another parchment flew through the air.

Lessar pulled out another cloth bag and threw it forward underhanded. She was so close to her enemy that it flew back behind Caliche, but Lessar moved her lips regardless.

“Fire of the right and water of the back, mix the colors of your directions with the wind. The wind of the back right that contrarily holds both the active and the passive becomes that which indicates calamity and a turning point!!”

That time, a light exploded out and an explosive wind was created.

Caliche must have feared being drawn in towards Lessar by the explosion behind her because she twisted her body to the right to escape it.

But that was not Lessar’s aim.

She was after the parchment that was ejected like an empty cartridge after Caliche activated a spell.

The parchment was blown through the air by the wind and Lessar grabbed it between her index finger and middle finger.

“I was right. It’s Ex Voto. It’s a method of more easily causing miracles by communicating your request to the Son of God via a third party such as one of the patron saints throughout history. Using parchment rather than an object is very like a Russian-style cabal. Were you trying to have it correspond to an icon?”

“…!!”

A giant rotating blade like what would be used to cut lumber appeared on the ground.

But Lessar ignored it and continued speaking.

“With Ex Voto, as proof that the prayer by proxy was carried out, the ceremony is ended when an offering related to the prayer is brought to the altar of the patron saint. For example, it could be a text indicating the contents of the prayer carried out. However…” Lessar brought her index finger in near the approaching rotating blade. “It would be simple to determine the method of cancelling the spell once you have that text, don’t you think?”

With a clear noise, the rotating blade shattered.

Lessar did not even give the woman time to be surprised.

She charged through the fragments of ice that glittered like certain types of decorations and headed in close to Caliche.

She held a cloth bag in her hand.

“Fire of the right and wind of the front, mix the colors of your directions with the wind. The wind of the front right which also indicates the active becomes that which indicates attack and change!!”

Caliche knew she could not make it in time.

It would explode before her eyes.

However, she still produced an ice knife from thin air despite knowing it would be futile.

And then…

“Exorcism.”

Lessar continued speaking.

“The wind of the front right shall quickly disperse. It shall distance itself from the attack and change of the wind of the front right and instead indicate defense and immutability!!”

By the time Caliche realized what had happened, it was already over.

The ice knife she had created with her own spell did not stab into Lessar. Instead, it shattered and the many pieces stabbed into Caliche’s own upper body.

The symbol of defense and immutability.

It was as if the knife had been reflected.

Part 5

Mikoto investigated the data in that storage area.

She was trying to find the details and locations of the as yet unseen higher ups controlling the plan.

The shopping mall was trying to drop a nuclear bomb on Academy City using old fighters, but Lessar predicted that the higher ups held the detonation code for the Solntse in order to prevent the pilots from betraying them.

Mikoto more or less agreed.

In order to stop the Solntse from detonating, they had to find the higher ups and prevent the detonation code from being entered before the bomb was dropped.

However…

"…I can't find anything," Mikoto finally muttered while looking at her PDA's screen.

She had found the name of the person with the highest level of responsibility according to the documents, but from what she could find, that person was only for show and had little to do with the actual work. It was possible that person was completely unaware of the shopping mall's darkness.

But given that those controlling the shopping mall from the shadows truly did exist, that result was suspicious. They must have worked to leave absolutely no trace because there was absolutely no sign of them. They were of course not in any register of names, and nothing that appeared to be their names was listed in any of the documents.

Mikoto looked at the ID card with the highest authority that Lessar had given her.

At the very least, the person who had worn that card around their neck had to exist, but the data made even his existence seem doubtful.

(…I can see why Setali truly felt there were no evil higher ups.)

But one thing was for sure.

The plan that had brought a Solntse into Academy City and that was about to drop one of those hydrogen bombs on the city with an old fighter was still continuing.

If she did not find those higher ups as soon as possible, that plan would be carried out.

With that in mind, Mikoto continued searching through the stored data, but she did not find anything.

Just as she was about to sigh, her fingertips suddenly stopped.

It was not related to the higher ups, but she had found some data that interested her.

“This is…?”

(…Data on the secondary plan…)

The large computer at the center of Code EIC had only had data on the primary plan to bring a Solntse into Academy City and detonate it on a timer. There had not even been a file on the secondary plan that would be carried out if the primary one failed.

She had now found a description of that secondary plan.

(I’m sure the secondary plan is just the plan to drop a Solntse from a modified MIG-21, but…)

If Mikoto were to read through the detailed description by the shopping mall, she might find some useful data she did not know yet. If she found information on the flight path or time for the modified MIG-21s, it would be easier to intercept them.

Mikoto opened the file with that in mind, but…

“Eh…?”

She forgot to breathe for an instant.

Mikoto repeated herself while still looking at the PDA.

“Eh…?”

Part 6

Multiple contrails passed by over Shirai Kuroko’s head.

They were likely from cutting edge fighters scrambling from District 23. It was not just 2 or 3 of them. She could tell that over 10 fighters had flown by above her.

They must have been cutting across Academy City while raising their altitude because the noise was quite loud even for Shirai who was on the ground.

(I wonder what official reason was given for those heading out of the city…)

She doubted they could completely disappear from the radar. And even if they could, it would be difficult to play ignorant if people on the surface saw them. She guessed Academy City was preparing some kind of official announcement.

But she did not have time to be surprised by that.

If the information from Mikoto was correct, at least one modified MIG-21 with the ability to carry a nuclear weapon was heading their way over the Sea of Japan. They could not allow something ridiculous like a hydrogen bomb to be dropped on Academy City.

At first Anti-Skill had been skeptical of what Shirai was saying, but their atmosphere had completely changed. After all, the terrorists using ultra high frequency electromagnetic rifles had turned out to actually have a hydrogen bomb.

Since Anti-Skill had taken command of the investigation, Shirai was not able to step past the yellow tape cutting off the path inside.

From outside, she spoke to the powered suits inside.

“Is the recovered uranium ornament…is the hydrogen bomb safe now?”

“Luckily, the level of danger was much lower than it could have been since it was obtained before the timer was activated. However, completely cutting off the circuit will be difficult. The nuclear technicians and bomb squad have to work carefully together to do so safely.”

There was a 20 or 30 year gap between the technology inside and outside Academy City. Normally, the city would have had the advantage when it came to tech, but working on a hydrogen bomb still made them work cautiously.

Also, Academy City did not defuse bombs by cutting colorful cords with wire cutters like in movies and dramas. They would use special chemicals to cause a chemical reaction that turned the explosive into a material that would not explode or they would throw it into the back of a special truck with armor on the level of a tank and completely detonate it within. The work done in those cases was usually done by a remote controlled robot with a manipulating arm.

However, that changed when it came to a hydrogen bomb.

That kind of bomb could not be safely detonated.

“The more destructive and more dangerous the bomb, the more we have to rely on old methods. …How ironic.”

“But at least we don’t have to carry out the work with the timer counting down like in a movie.”

The Anti-Skill officers in powered suits looked up at the remaining traces of the contrails in the sky.

“…But that’s the real problem right now. A modified MIG-21 could drop a hydrogen bomb on us at any time.”

Shirai felt the same way.

“I know the threat is approaching, but there is nothing I can do… Really, this is not good to my stomach.”

Part 7

The ice knife shattered before Lessar's eyes.

The countless sparkling shards of ice struck Caliche's upper body almost like a shotgun blast.

Caliche's body was blown a few meters away while blood sprayed about.

"Well, I guess that about settles this."

Lessar looked around the area and it seemed Caliche's comrades were mostly collapsed and unable to move due to the green lightning attacks. It would have been a problem if one of them was faking it, but it did not seem that any of them had had the strength to spare needed to calculate out that far.

Lessar walked over as if dragging her exhausted body along and picked up her steel glove. She then turned toward Caliche who was collapsed face down on the ground.

Paying no heed to the woman's bleeding, Lessar forcibly flipped her face up.

She crouched down and stared at the woman's face.

"Even if you remain silent, I have ways of 'looking inside', so there's no point in being stubborn."

"…"

"Why did you kill the higher ups of the shopping mall and take over their plan? Do you have the detonation code for the nuke?"

"Our spiritual items…" Caliche moved her bloody lips, but she was not responding to Lessar's questions. "From the number and details of our spiritual items, you realized that we had people in hiding providing logistical support in addition to the direct battle unit…”

“What…?”

“If you knew that much, why didn’t you realize it? Why didn’t you realize that leaving the ones who specialize in spiritual work and construction was much more dangerous than letting the battle unit remain active?”

Lessar’s breath caught in her throat.

At almost the exact same time, a giant mass of constructions broke through the wall of the large business facility and into the parking lot.

“Chehh…”

Lessar slowly stood up from her crouching position as she saw the giant silhouette through the dust that had been blown into the air.

What she saw was difficult to describe.

It was something like giant wheels. They were basically made of a white stone like marble and the outer edge that contacted the ground was reinforced with a gold-colored metal.

The small ones had a radius of 3 meters and the large ones had a radius of 15 meters.

The wheels were not simple ones. Instead, they were made of different sized wheels on top of each other like the gear of a mountain bike.

The large and small wheels fit into each other like gears connecting them together like a giant snake.

While making creaking noises, the giant wheel snake slowly bent its large form. It was as if it were setting its aim on Lessar.

If that giant form came at her, she would be crushed thinner than a piece of paper.

“Oh, come on, really? It feels like Telesma has been forcibly gathered together.”

“We originally set that up as insurance.” Without getting up, Caliche moved just her head to look over and smile at Lessar. “We would use it if the shopping mall decided not to give us our reward. The situation got out of hand and we lost our chance to use it, but it looks like it has come in handy after all.”

The giant form that appeared through the curtain of dust was easily over 70 meters long. It was likely a weapon designed to crush things with its weight.

Even though the shopping mall was huge, it did not have the space needed to hide a weapon that large. Either a magic circle to call it in from afar had been cleverly hidden or only the necessary things had been gathered so that the other parts could be gathered together automatically.

The weapon could likely cause quite a bit of damage just by freely running around and making random U-turns, but Caliche would not have called it in for just that.

It was best to assume it had some kind of magical power added in.

“Don’t tell me that thing’s for sale too,” Lessar said sarcastically, but Caliche did not respond.

When she did open her mouth to speak, it was on a completely different subject.

“It isn’t us.”

“?”

“We have no interest in oranges or nuclear materials. …Code EIC is a purely scientific product. However, the science side is not enough to investigate how it affects the human mind. For that reason, they contacted us in secret asking us to observe the people’s minds from the occult point of view. We were signed onto the project as just one of many sensors.”

“…”

“In exchange, we were going to use Code EIC’s improvements on the human mind from a group psychology point of view for ourselves, but that promise was broken. To repay them for that, we killed the higher ups and then tried to get our hands on Code EIC once more.”

Caliche was speaking as if she was not even looking at Lessar who stood before her.

It was possible that her consciousness was fading due to her blood loss.

It was true that Code EIC could be quite useful from a religious point of view. Using uncertain information such as rumors and urban legends, one could isolate a single group and freely regulate the merits of people within that community. One could create a headquarters, a leader, or a natural enemy just as one wanted.

It was the same as raising or lowering the values of products.

Some people within the community would appear to be bright and shining and others would appear stagnant, dark, and fallen into the shadows.

In truth, the goal Code EIC had been created for could be called a financial religion.

Just by changing out what was at the center of it all completely changed the community.

And it could be changed to be like the world that Lessar and Caliche lived in.

“But *it isn’t us*,” Caliche said with an odd firmness to her voice despite her condition. “*Someone is continuing the plan and detonating the Solntse, but it isn’t us*.”

“What…?”

Lessar turned her attention more to Caliche than to the giant weapon made of a great number of wheels. The woman was merely smiling. She would likely not say anything more even if Lessar pressed her for more information. In fact, doing so could even lead the woman to finally dying of blood loss where she would just continue smiling as a corpse.

And most importantly, the giant enemy that had appeared from the shopping mall was not going to let her take her time questioning the woman.

“Not good, not good.”

While using her magical communications to order an additional bombardment from Bayloupe, Lessar held out her steel glove.

“This is not time to be worrying about stopping a nuclear explosion that doesn’t especially concern me.”

Part 8

Despite being covered in bandages, the security guard Enirya G. Algonskaya was still continuing her work.

“So the riots are spreading through the central business facility more than the hotels and airport. The number of people trying to take advantage of the chaos is increasing…”

Enirya thought as she checked on the situation using the Semipublic AR.

The rioting had begun on the pretext of protecting the peace by eliminating the dangerous person from Academy City who was trying to detonate a hydrogen bomb, but that surface reason was beginning to crumble.

However, that also meant that the rioters were regaining their ability to think rationally. If the situation reached the point where they could shake them mentally using verbal warnings rather than having to resort to force, the situation could be resolved more easily, but…

Suddenly, one of her colleagues who was similarly injured called out to her.

“I have a report.”

“Not much is going to surprise me after all this.”

“A giant 70 meter construction has been spotted within the grounds of the business facility. It appears to be moving about while destroying the building.”

“What!? What does it look like!?”

Enirya snapped at her colleague, but he did not seem to have a good grasp on the situation himself.

Enirya let out a groan as she received the explanation that it was a mysterious construction that could possibly be a weapon or a vehicle and that looked like a collection of many giant wheels.

“…Are the higher ups trying to literally crush the rioting using some secret weapon of a road roller or something?”

“The details are unknown, but it seems to be having the effect of putting a stop to the rioting in various places. It seems the people’s thoughts are changing from joining in a dangerous situation to watching a situation they do not understand.”

Suddenly, a new piece of information appeared on the Semipublic AR Enirya was looking at. She frowned and set the screen at a level where her colleague could see it.

“It seems the use of martial law has been approved.”

“The approval of the higher ups is needed for that.”

That was indeed their chance to put an end to the rioting. If martial law was declared while the rioters were focused on the giant construction, they could cut the rioters off from each other by cutting off the flow of information. After that, they could crush the riots individually until enough of the rioters had been defeated that the rioting could not continue.

Her colleague looked relieved.

“We lost track of where they were during the riots, but it seems they’re okay. And they are still powerful enough to take the actions necessary to bring functionality back to the city.”

But…

“Wait a second,” Enirya said cutting him off. “Don’t over half of the higher ups have to give their electronic signatures to enact special orders such as declaring martial law or imposing a gag order?”

“Y-yes. What of it?”

“For security reasons, those electronic signatures are only valid if they are carried out through the devices in the manager’s room. And with the higher ups missing, they of course are not in that room.” Enirya paused for a second before continuing. “Who made those electronic signatures and from where?”

“C-could it just be because we are in a state of emergency? I don’t know where the higher ups have evacuated to, but as long as they are all gathered in one place, they could still enact one of those special orders without going through the manager’s room.”

“That isn’t the issue. Even if it was the higher ups that did this, they can’t just ignore the security issue. Even if they are secured in some kind of shelter, they would not be able to send out electronic signatures at this level.”

“Then…”

“Once again, there is some system we are unaware of,” Enirya said as if she had given up on something. “But if so, we have no proof that these electronic signatures actually came from the higher ups. In order to accurately judge the situation, we need to find out who made these electronic signatures.”

“…”

“We will thoroughly investigate this.” Enirya pointed at the wall with the window displayed on it. “We will find out who made these and where they were sent from.”

Part 9

The giant wheel snake broke through the wall of the shopping mall and appeared outside.

However, part of Lessar was still optimistic.

The giant wheel snake was indeed a dynamic weapon with a focus on destruction, but it had likely been prepared to destroy the entire landscape of an enemy base rather than an individual magician.

That was why Lessar had a chance of winning. If the destruction was the broad wide scale type, then there would be gaps through which she could slip. The giant wheel snake was constructed out of giant circles. When a ball was put inside a box it just barely fit inside, there would be gaps in the corners. If Lessar continually moved about aiming for those areas, she could avoid the enemy's attacks.

Or so it should have been.

Lessar suddenly noticed that the rubble made of broken building materials was being sucked in towards the surface of the giant wheels.

It was not just a collection of giant wheels. It was a giant spiritual item that had been created by a magic cabal.

Lessar had forgotten that simple fact, so she was caught off guard.

Immediately afterwards, the countless large and small wheels plowed toward Lessar with a loud grinding roar.

The road surface broke under its weight and the remains were sucked in and utterly crushed at the point where the wheels met. Lessar's small body would soon meet the same fate.

When that giant form broke into the parking lot, Lessar was already gone.

The giant wheels chewed through everything in its way.

She could not fix her gaze on anything.

She could not feel gravity or the ground on her legs that dangled down below.

Even the flow of her blood was unstable, so she had lost the ability to think properly.

Amid all that, Lessar blinked.

"…Huh? Why am I being embraced by Floris?"

"Because I saved you," answered Floris, a girl who also worked at Nihon Daruma.

Just like Lessar had a tail stretching out from her miniskirt, Floris had small wing-like decorations attached to her shoulders. Those decorations currently had even bigger wings of light extending from them and she was flying at high speed just off the ground. Just when she occasionally needed to adjust her direction, she would lightly kick off the ground.

They cut between buildings and flew right past the trees lining the roads, but Lessar felt no fear. Just like when riding a bus or train, the acrobatics of the driver did not feel real as a passenger.

In fact, her focus was mostly on the giant wheel snake that was chasing after them and crushing the trees and street lights before sucking them up between the wheels where they were further crushed.

Floris spoke as she worked to keep her flight stable.

"But what is that thing? It looks like a weapon that crushes things with its weight and size alone. Is it used to suppress an enemy base by crushing absolutely everything flat?"

"If it is…ew. Caliche and the others must have been squished as flat as a newspaper by their own spiritual item."

"Wouldn't it be set to not crush its allies? For example, it could be set to not put any weight on its allies."

"What do you think the base of the spell is?"

"I've only seen it from afar, but it seems to be different from the patron saint types they've used so far. Those Telesma wheels probably have their foundation in the Ophanim."

"But the quality of the power used seems to be of Michael. For some reason, he is recorded as being both an archangel and a patron saint, right?"

"They have forced power into a spiritual item that has its symbols skewed. It sounds like they would lose quite a bit of power constructing it that way."

"I'm pretty sure there was some story related to Michael that had to do with chains. Something about linking circles together."

"You mean binding the highest class of fallen angel for 1000 years? Hmm, now that you mention it, the absorption of the rubble might be related to that. And the lack of damage to allies could be added on by an expanded interpretation of the fact that the chains that bind evil do not bind believers."

"So what do we do now?" Lessar looked back behind them while Floris still held onto her. "That thing's a weapon that just crushes things under its giant form, so it will likely pursue us to the end. Given its speed and destructive power, you may not be able to lose it with just your wings."

"Of course, I'll be turning back partway through." Floris responded arbitrarily. "But it doesn't look like it's going to just wait around."

"?"

Lessar did not even have time to look confused.

The giant wheel snake crashed through a nearby wall and charged toward Lessar and Floris. Their opponent ignored the layout of the roads and just plowed straight through buildings to get at them.

“Eh? You’re kidding!! That thing moves similarly to a collection of gears. With that much rubble in there, it should grind to a halt like getting some cloth caught between the gears!!”

“Well, it is part of the occult.”

“I guess there’s no complaining about it then.”

Arcs of green lightning appeared from afar and attacked the giant wheel snake, but Lessar doubted they would have much effect. With a tail of sparks following it, the giant construction pressed on toward Lessar and Floris.

It started making continuous hard crunching noises.

The construction of the giant wheel snake was changing. Like the gear of a bicycle changing, it changed its pattern to one more effective for chasing the two girls.

“Have you found its weakness yet!?”

“I’ve probably come up with about the same thing you have.”

Floris turned sharply and flew through the streets while darting through the gaps in the rubble the countless wheels had created. Lessar turned her focus back to the giant wheel snake that continued following them while crushing the buildings and trees.

More accurately, she focused on the points where the giant wheels met.

“When it swallows up pieces of rubble that are too large and when it changes the arrangement of the gears, the wheels temporarily ignore gravity and distance themselves from each other. Of course, a mystical power is needed to cause such mystical phenomena. In this case, it’s Telesma.”

“Right.”

“If we time it carefully and interfere at that moment, the normal rearrangement pattern will fail and something terrible could happen. A huge amount of power is needed to move something that huge, so having that power go out of control will create plenty of destructive power on its own.”

“Right, right.” Floris raised the output of her wings of light. “But the main problem is that those are not the same as simple wheels or gears. To make them grind to a halt, we need analyze what magical symbols those wheels use and what process they use to rearrange.”

“There are two ways to do that,” Lessar suggested while moving her fingers. “The first is to continue letting it attack us like this. If you’re skillful enough to avoid all of its attacks, I can carry out the analysis slowly but surely. But it doesn’t look like you have the mobility to spare to do that and the plan to drop a nuke on Academy City is still ongoing. It wouldn’t be good to stretch this out unnecessarily.”

“What’s the second?”

“That is of course to get on it directly to get near the ridiculously huge wheels.”

Floris fell silent upon hearing that.

She finally opened her mouth to speak while continuing to quickly fly at low altitude.

“…Do you understand what you’re saying?”

“Of course. Only our scouting specialist—that’s me—can carry out the analysis of that spiritual item. You couldn’t do it, Floris.”

“If I let go now, you’ll be upside down. Even if you do land on top of the pursuing giant wheel snake, your feet will get caught in the wheels’ absorption and you’ll be thrown upside down into the gap between the wheels.”

“The axis of the wheels is not rotating. Only the wheel around it is rotating at high speed. If I can pinpoint my landing on that, I won’t get caught up in it.”

“Do you see how fast it’s moving? Don’t you think you’ll be thrown off by inertia if it makes a sharp turn?”

“If I can get close enough, the actual analysis won’t take much time at all. If I can analyze what magical symbols are used in the regulation of the intervals before getting thrown off, you and the others can defeat that giant snake.”

“If you fail at any point in that, you’ll die!! And all the data going into that plan is just speculation! If any of your assumptions are wrong, you’ll be jumping into a complete dead end!!”

“Floris,” Lessar slowly interrupted. “We have an objective here, right?”

“…”

“That objective is not to die here. And even if I do die, we need to avoid utter destruction. Do you understand? Analyzing those magical symbols is necessary to defeat that thing, only I can carry that analysis out, and I have to get close enough to touch those wheels to do so. That’s just the situation we’re in here.”

“God damn it.”

“If you understand, then let go of me on the count of three. Okay. Three, two, one…”

There was no hesitation in Lessar’s voice.

And realistically, there was no other way.

As Floris continued to fly at low altitude, she kicked strongly off the ground once which sent her flying up about 10 meters into the sky. And then she let go of Lessar.

Part 10

Her cell phone would not connect.

Mikoto squeezed the plastic body with enough force to almost crush it, but she still could not connect.

At first, she had thought it was because the storage area was surrounded with thick walls and she had left the room, but it would not connect no matter where she went.

The city’s communications facilities may have been taken out due to the riots or the communications network may have been intentionally cut off.

It did not matter as long as she could not contact Shirai Kuroko or someone else in Academy City.

With the secondary plan being carried out, whether she could contact them or not was literally a matter of life or death.

(Ahh, dammit!! First, I need to figure out how far the communications are cut off. At this rate, the Solntse could still be detonated!!)

That was when her cell phone suddenly started to ring.

(Why…? No, maybe it’s still working within the city.)

An unfamiliar number was displayed on the screen, but she did not particularly care.

She answered the phone.

“Hi there. If I told you it’s been a while, can you figure out who this is?”

“Oh, lovely. So bank transfer scams are popular outside of Japan, too.”

“This is the happy and embarrassed Lancis. We got naked together in a back alley and changed into swimsuits.”

“…Wow. You’ve taken the memory I want to recall the least and set is as the thumbnail. And why do you know my number?”

“Do you know how much information can be taken from a cell phone that’s in wallet mode?”

Mikoto just about yelled out, “Just tell me where you really got my number!!”, but she resisted.

“Okay, what do you want? Oh, and I need to ask: can you connect outside the city with your cell phone? There’s something wrong with the signal and I can’t get a connection.”

“I haven’t tried, so I don’t know. And I didn’t call you to discuss the number of antennae.”

“?”

“Well, y’see…”

“Hey, why are you suddenly just trailing off like that?”

“This is difficult to say, but Lessar…”

Part 11

Her feet slipped.

It was almost a miracle that Lessar managed to land on the nonrotating axis without getting crushed by the giant wheel.

And once she landed, the rest would not take long.

It was true that the weapon was quite powerful and getting caught up in it just once would likely give her wounds she would never recover from.

However, that also meant a lot of effort had to go into controlling it. They would likely have decided to make the magical symbols as pronounced, clear, and easy to understand as possible.

Once she got near, she could quickly analyze it.

And after that, it would not be difficult to destroy the giant wheel snake.

Suddenly, she felt a dull vibration. She felt it coming from her legs, so Lessar looked down at her feet, but she quickly realized that she was wrong.

The entire giant wheel snake was shaking greatly.

As the wheels rearranged, the giant structure’s entire silhouette changed from the straight “snake” to something more triangular.

But just like a bicycle’s gear, the wheels were not in a completely straight line. Instead, they shifted slightly to the side with each connection.

The giant construction almost seemed to be trying to scrape off and crush a bit of “dirt” from its side.

If the “top” of the triangle above her head came straight down, it would definitely hit Lessar where she stood on top of the axis.

Lessar’s throat quickly grew dry.

Her thought processes reached a point where she could think of nothing but life or death.

At that time, she had two options.

First, she could jump away as quickly as possible and run as far away as she could in order to avoid being hit by the wheel being swung down. However, the giant wheel snake could make a quick U-turn at any time. She doubted she could escape on foot and there was no guarantee that Floris would be able to pick her up.

Second, she could carry out the analysis of the magical symbols of the wheels knowing she could end up being hit by the attack. However, even if she completed the analysis, she still had to put together a spell to stop the movements of the wheels, so her odds of success were quite low.

And the option she chose was…

“Yeah,” she said with a small smile.

The slight bit of fear on her face disappeared.

“If I’m likely to get killed either way, I have to choose the one that won’t leave me with a guilty conscience!!”

She yelled out.

She stepped forward.

She stretched out her hand.

She placed her palm just barely off of the side of the quickly rotating wheel and recited something under her breath.

Lessar cast aside the option of jumping off the axle and focused all her energy on analyzing the magical symbols.

She felt as if she had grasped something.

But in that time, the giant wheel snake that had become triangular continued down straight above her head. It moved slowly but accurately down and it was more like a circular saw used to slice lumber than it was a blunt weapon.

It gave a strong impression of death.

Lessar could almost see the countdown until it hit.

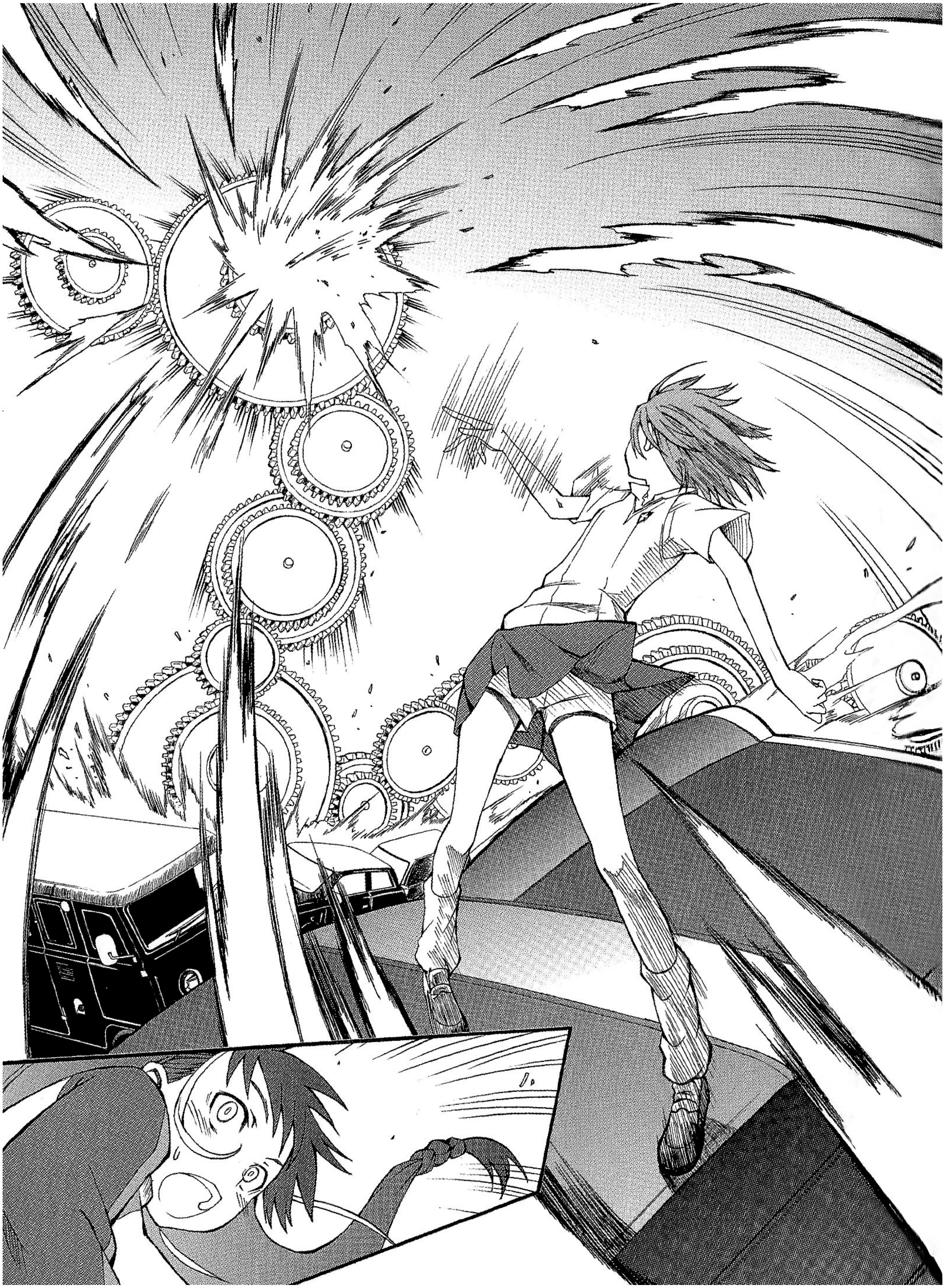
Even so, she continued fighting to find a means of defeating the giant wheel snake down to the very end.

And…

With an explosive noise, the entire surface shook.

The huge body of the giant wheel snake trembled.

Its already bent silhouette became even more twisted.



However, that twisting had not been carried out by the giant wheel snake’s own power.

It had been done by an external force.

It had been forcibly twisted by the “other power” that stood opposed to magic.

In other words…

It had been Tokiwadai Middle School’s Railgun.

Lessar heard the explosion after a slight delay.

The giant mass of wheels had been greatly twisted to the side, but it still managed to force itself down toward Lessar.

However, the line of wheels that had been twisted by the Railgun was too far out to hit Lessar. The external force had caused it to miss its initial attack point.

And…

Whether it hit or missed, once it attacked, it lost time until it could attack again. In order to rearrange the many wheels and attack Lessar again, it would have to create a slight opening.

(This will work. I’ve read the contents of their spiritual item!!)

“Bayloupe, Floris, Lancis, I need assistance!! It is indeed related to Michael! It uses the property of bringing balance to the world via military force to constantly give stability, preservation, and regulation to the space between the wheels!!”

In that case, the conditions to create an explosion were simple.

Just like all the other angels, Michael could not be destroyed or brought into disorder. What was considered “stable” for any circumstances had already been inputted into him, so he would take the optimal action and bring about the optimal result. But Lessar and the others were not being threatened by Michael himself. It was nothing more than energy.

What was considered “stable” had been conveniently overwritten by the magic user who had brought in the Telesma.

That meant they could easily make the giant wheel snake self-destruct by interfering with that point and destructively overwriting the conditions for that stability.

The giant wheel snake tried to rearrange its wheels to change its shape and destroy Lessar.

Lessar did not overlook that.

It was her only chance.

“The archangel and patron saint that is St. Michael holds the chains and the key. The chains bind the highest class of fallen angels and the key seals the pit into which the king of demons is cast so that 1000 years of stability may occur.” She recited a spell. “But now that key is to be reconfirmed!! Can the key truly seal the pit? Is it enough to seal the king of demons? Is it appropriate to bring about 1000 years of stability!? Recalculate the necessary outputs needed to match those conditions!!”

The phenomenon that occurred then was quite simple.

Destruction occurred.

The giant wheels fell and completely shattered the rubble and road surface below.

Normally, everything would have been swallowed up and crushed. Nothing in the area would have remained. Not the buildings, not the trees, not anything.

But a moment before, Lessar had rewritten the conditions. The stability between the wheels had been lost and the countless wheels both large and small had scattered. Some collapsed to the side like a coin on its side falling over and some continued rolling and slammed into the wall of a building.

“Oh, oh, oh, oh…”

Lessar jumped down to the ground from the axle. It was only about 5 meters up.

An amateur would probably break some bones at that height, but a trained stuntman could jump down that far without any cushions.

The road surface there should have been made into part of the Semipublic AR, but it had not been able to withstand the weight that had been put on it. Sparks flew from various areas and it showed no sign of functioning.

When she landed, Lessar saw Mikoto striking a daunting pose with her hands on her hips.

Lessar had a bad feeling about what was to come.

“I thought I told you not to go running off on your own.”

“Yeah, well…”

That vague response caused sparks to fly her way.

Part 12

“It seems heading after the higher ups of the shopping mall was in vain. The…um…outside group that was controlling that giant wheel snake seems to have been involved as well, but they said they are not the ones who have taken control of the attack plan to use the Solntse in Academy City either. In other words…” said Lessar.

She hid the fact that the higher ups of the shopping mall had all been turned to headless corpses, but she still managed to more or less get the situation across.

“There’s still someone else who has taken control of the plan?”

“Correct.”

Mikoto held her head in her hands.

Given what she had found out about the secondary plan in the storage room, the situation was not looking good.

“By the way, what is this about the secondary plan? Is it not a plan to drop a Solntse from a modified MIG-21 after all?”

“No, it isn’t. It turns out…”

Part 13

A number of explosive noises rang out above the Sea of Japan.

The modified MIG-21s were loaded with chaff and flairs, but there was simply a limit to what they could do. The cutting edge fighters prepared by Academy City were more than two generations more advanced. And the difference in numbers was simply too great.

It was impossible to fly such that the more advanced fighters did not get on their tail.

There was no way to escape a lock.

Once a missile was fired, it was all over.

Even while taking special actions like quick rotations and using deceptive actions such as using chaff and flares, they could not continue to avoid the explosives forever while they approached with sharp angles.

“Klyuch Samolyot to Nochi Samolyot!! That’s enough!! Eject right now. Smoke is coming from your main wing where it was hit. If you stick with this any longer, you’ll just get caught up in the explosion!!”

“Nochi Samolyot to all crafts!! Not yet! As long as we aren’t all taken out, we win!! I’ll draw the enemy crafts to me!! While I do…!!”

The ocean was just too vast.

Academy City was just too far away.

The pilot of Klyuch Samolyot looked at a gauge in the cockpit with a burning feeling in his stomach.

Just a bit more.

The time was coming.

No matter how erratically he flew or even if he loop-the-looped, his cold sweating would not stop. He was being surrounded from all sides. He would not last long. Those were his simple feelings. He was of course outnumbered and outclassed, but his modified MIG-21 also had a giant weight hanging down from it. It was impossible to take part in a dogfight like that.

Machine gun fire started coming from one of the cutting edge fighters on his tail and a line of tracer bullets approached. Shortly thereafter, the unpleasant sound of metal being torn reverberated through the fighter.

“Shit!! My right aileron was taken out!!”

With that destroyed, he could no longer tilt the craft. Simply put, it was like having the steering wheel no longer work. And it was clear he would be shot down in no time now that another penalty had been added on in that already difficult situation.

But the pilot of Klyuch Samolyot smiled upon seeing what one of the gauges said.

They had won.

“Klyuch Samolyot to all crafts.”

With that, they had won.

“The time has come. There is no need to stick with this any longer! Let’s end this quickly!!”

After yelling that, the pilot of Klyuch Samolyot yanked on a lever which activated the ejection device. Tiny explosives detached the clear windshield covering the cockpit and it blew away as if it had slid back. Immediately afterwards, the seat and the pilot in it were ejected.

Prisluga Samolyot and Nochi Samolyot’s pilots also ejected from their old fighters and their parachutes opened.

“What?” said a bewildered Academy City pilot. “They just abandoned their hydrogen bomb. That was their last hope and their trump card. I doubt they can swim back to Russia once they fall in the ocean. They’ll just end up being recovered by one of our ships. It’s like they want to be captured.”

“…Look, dammit. There’s a submarine coming up to the surface. They were planning to recover the pilots here from the beginning.”

“Should we sink it?”

“We only expected this to be a dogfight. We don’t have any torpedoes.”

Meanwhile, the pilots that had fallen into the ocean were recovered.

One of the Academy City pilots clicked his tongue at the submarine that started to submerge.

“I guess we should be rejoicing that they gave up their hydrogen bomb. Contact the salvage ship and have them begin the recovery operation for the dropped hydrogen bomb as planned. Now that we know the enemy has a sub, you should tell them to make sure to sweep the sea for mines.”

The Academy City pilot took one last stubborn sweep over the area where the submarine had submerged.

“So in the end, what were they after?”

Part 14

“Please tell me this is a joke…” Lessar said while peering over at the PDA Mikoto was holding.

However, it was the truth.

It displayed the details of the secondary plan which was to come into effect upon the failure of the primary plan of using a timer to detonate the Solntse hydrogen bomb that had been brought into Academy City.

It said:

We can only prepare a single Solntse which is being used as the uranium ornament. As such, it is necessary to put together this plan so that our single shot is used to its fullest.

In the secondary plan, three MIG-21s modified to carry nuclear weapons will be sent out as a diversion. They will be holding dummy bombs the same size as a Solntse. Those three will draw the attention of the air defense network, so they will not notice what we are truly after.

We will be sending a small UAV. It will fly above Academy City and act as a mobile antenna with which to transmit the detonation signal to the Solntse being used as the uranium ornament.

Even if the timer is stopped or it is recovered before the timer is activated, the Solntse will detonate as soon as it receives the detonation signal from the UAV.

The closer to Academy City the UAV takes off from, the less the risk, but if it is too close, it may be detected before even taking off. As such, it will be taking off from a cruiser in Tokyo Bay.

“The modified MIG-21s are just decoys? They merely have the ability to carry nuclear weapons, but they are not actually loaded with hydrogen bombs?”

muttered Lessar in utter shock.

Mikoto’s face had also paled, but part of the plan made sense to her.

Lessar had once predicted that the Solntses to be dropped from modified MIG-21s could not be detonated by the pilots. She had concluded that it was quite likely that they would not detonate without a detonation code transmitted from the higher ups in order to prevent the pilots from betraying them.

But that would not work.

To prevent the leak of information on their technology, Academy City had a powerful jamming signal running parallel to its outer wall. Even if they transmitted a signal from the Russian shopping mall, there was no guarantee that it would make it to the Solntse within Academy City.

That was what the UAV was for.

An environment allowing long distance transmissions had been created where the person behind the plan could send the detonation signal to the UAV or even cancel it if necessary.

Once the small UAV with the detonation signal inside it made it within Academy City, it could transmit the signal without being affected by the jamming.

It would detonate the Solntse that Anti-Skill had recovered before the timer had been activated and was currently being prepared to be dismantled.

“That means…”

“The danger is not over even if those old fighters are shot down,” Mikoto said as if continuing Lessar’s words. “If the UAV relaying the detonation signal makes it to Academy City, the city will be utterly blown away!!”

She would not make it in time if she tried to return to Academy City.

All Mikoto and Lessar could do was find whoever it was that had taken over the plan and bring it all to a stop from the top down.

But where was the person behind it?

The higher ups of the Russian shopping mall were out of the picture already. And the outside group that had apparently been manipulating them from the background also was not continuing the plan using the nuke. Who was in control of the plan? Were there really that many layers of secret groups working in the shadows behind the previous group?

“This isn’t going to turn into a situation where there actually isn’t anyone else behind this, is it?” said Lessar quietly

“You mean this plan using a nuke is just continuing despite no one being in control of it?”

“No, not that.” Lessar seemed as if she was having trouble saying what she was trying to say. “I don’t know all that much about science, so an elite Academy City student like you might just laugh at me, but…”

“What?”

“This city seems to have a means of moving the entire organization without the existence of a clear boss…”

A very bad feeling came over Mikoto.

It had come to her mind too.

When she thought about it, it had been deeply related from the very first incident. It had spread the urban legends. It had caused the riots. It had free use of the cameras and the Semipublic AR, it read people’s reactions, it automatically created news sources to spread, and it manipulated group psychology like a toy car.

“The one behind this…is Code EIC itself…?” Mikoto muttered blankly.

Normally thinking, the answer was no. A machine rebelling was just too ridiculous. Anyone who regularly used computers knew that real computers and programs did not behave like that.

But…

Code EIC was a system made to interfere with the human mind using rumors in order to alter the values of selected products.

In a world without humanity, Code EIC would have no purpose and it could display its ability the greatest in a world overflowing with people. In that case, there was a possibility that it could bare its fangs toward humanity without having any actual “will” such as hatred toward humanity or wanting to fill the world with a new order. It could just be obeying simple commands to expand its functionality or to spread its range of options.

Had Mikoto, Lessar, the occult convenience store, the workers in the shopping mall, the higher ups, and the outside group all been manipulated by Code EIC?

Had attacking Academy City been a necessary command in order to expand its functionality as a machine?

After thinking through all that, Mikoto shook her head.

“…Yeah right.”

“?”

“The higher ups of the shopping mall did not like the difference between Academy City’s technology and the technology disclosed to the cooperative institutions. They decided that they would create a business model even if it meant the destruction of the field of psychic powers development and tried to lessen the 20 or 30 year gap with Academy City by preparing a Solntse. They planned to cause great damage to Academy City and bring their own unreliable data to the forefront in the world.” As Mikoto spoke, she sorted through all the different ideas in her own head. “But the Russian shopping mall is not the only place that would benefit from that!! If the scientific data held by a cooperative institution would grow much more valuable after the destruction of Academy City, then many different cooperative institutions would benefit from that. There are indeed other people who would benefit from this. That way of thinking is much more realistic than saying the computer started controlling people to expand its functionality on its own!!”

“Then…”

“Yes. There is an actual person behind this. This person may be hiding behind Code EIC and trying to pass it all off as computer issues. But we won’t let that happen. If this person is controlling the plan, we have to stop them!!”

The secondary plan continued with its objective to reuse the Solntse hydrogen bomb that had been brought into Academy City.

A still unseen person was behind it all.

A UAV acting as an antenna to transmit the detonation signal was heading to Academy City from Tokyo Bay.

They had to stop any or all of those things.

That was the final battle.

Chapter 8

Part 1

A craft 80 centimeters long and 50 centimeters wide including the very ends of the main wings was bringing destruction to Academy City. It had the same basic form as the kind of toy with a battery and motor inside that gained propulsion from a propeller. Normally, it was controlled remotely, but if the signal weakened, it could continue flying automatically according to a program.

It was a small UAV.

It held the detonation signal for the Solntse hydrogen bomb and would mercilessly detonate the bomb Anti-Skill had recovered once it entered Academy City airspace.

Someone had sent it out.

It was as if the grim reaper had folded a love letter into a paper airplane and thrown it toward Academy City.

Mikoto pulled out her cell phone.

Before, she had been unable to contact Academy City. It was likely the situation had not improved, but she refused to give up on that hope.

Lessar was (reluctantly) applying first aid to Caliche and the others from her organization. Mikoto darted through a narrow employee corridor, heading to a floor where she thought she would get a better signal.

She opened up her address book, highlighted Shirai Kuroko’s number, and hit the call button.

She had to get her message across as soon as possible.

If they were satisfied with only having successfully intercepted the old fighters over the Sea of Japan, they would be unable to stop the slowly approaching UAV.

If that happened, it was all over.

Academy City would disappear in a flash of light.

(Answer, answer, answer. Just answer already!!)

The ringing continued.

The confusion must have been continuing on the other end as well. Mikoto doubted they would actually announce that a hydrogen bomb was approaching, but the back and forth over the emergency lines could possibly overload the communications network. She had to get her information across before that happened.

She knew she had to, but…

She had to get it across no matter what, but…

No matter how many times she tried, her phone would not connect to anyone outside the shopping mall.

“Dammit!!” cursed Mikoto.

She hit the call button again, but it just would not connect. She was not even switched over to the message center.

A bad feeling built up in her chest and she gave up on trying to make a call. Instead, she started typing out an email with her thumb. Right after she hit the send button, she got an email in response. It was simply too quick. She checked her inbox and found a new message with a cold subject saying her email had failed to send.

(But I managed to connect with that Lancis girl before!! Is it just outside this city I can’t connect to!?)

Mikoto’s power could be used over a network. However, she failed even when she tried to forcibly open the line. It was either cut off with some kind of special method or the connector was physically removed.

Then, Lessar opened the door coming from the employee corridor and headed toward her.

“How goes it?”

“Not well.”

Mikoto explained what had just happened. As usual, Lessar’s expression clouded over a bit.

“We have no way of knowing if the Solntse’s detonator has been dismantled yet or not. Academy City has no idea this UAV is headed there. …With the way things are, can they really avoid this danger?”

“It’ll be difficult. I’m sure they will remain on guard for the time being, but it will only be on the level of seeing if any remnants of that group are still inside Academy City. They won’t suspect that there is still a chance of the Solntse detonating now that they have determined it to be safely recovered.”

“So what will we do?”

Mikoto lightly shook her cell phone in response to Lessar’s question.

“We find the person that’s keeping me from using this. Whoever it is has to still be hiding in the shopping mall. First, we need to find them from the method and route used to block the signal. …And if they’re the person behind all this, they might have a means of getting a detailed location of the UAV. If I can get that information to Kuroko, the odds of successfully intercepting it will go way up.”

“Caliche I. Niknosh did not seem to have any more allies,” Lessar said as she thought. “Should we hit her some more to see if anything more turns up?”

“With as much blood as she’s lost, anything else is likely to stop her heart. If we aren’t likely going to get any information, it’s just a waste of time.”

(Well, the blocking of the signal is not the kind of method I would expect from Caliche anyway.)

“?”

Mikoto looked puzzled, but she had no time to think about anything else.

She focused and turned her power toward the cell phone.

“Where are you going to check first?”

“The transmission network from the shopping mall to Academy City. I’m rechecking the path data from this phone takes as it heads to its destination. There has to be an opening a third party is using to cut in and interfere.”

As she responded, Mikoto manipulated the internal workings of the cell phone directly using her power to manipulate electricity, but she was very uneasy.

They were at the climax. Whatever she did, she had no time. If some new giant and dangerous secret organization showed up, it was highly likely she would not be able to deal with it. She had to pray that the enemy was on a size where she could manage to take it out before the UAV arrived at Academy City from Tokyo Bay.

As she thought that, Mikoto suddenly frowned.

“What is it?”

“I’m checking how the data from my phone heads to Academy City, but it seems that all phone data in the shopping mall gathers in one place before being sent outside.”

That in and of itself was not too unusual.

In an area that dealt with information with a certain level of value, phone lines did not just stretch all around like a spider web. All the data would be gathered together in a giant server and checked in real time before being sent out. Essentially, a checking station was set up.

There did seem to be isolated servers like the one for credit card information in the casino, but the main pipeline out seemed to be cut off due to the emergency situation.

It was a bit different than she had expected, but now the issue was just where the checking station for phone and email was located.

Mikoto continued to look confused and spoke to Lessar.

“It’s in the main computer of the stock market center. In other words…”

“The center of Code EIC?”

That computer had been set up on the pretext of gathering stock data from around the world and processing it all at high speed. In secret, Code EIC sent out information to various types of media both mass and local in order to freely manipulate the people within the shopping mall. In either case, it was not too strange for it to act as a relay point for cell phone data.

However, the timing was odd.

Code EIC had already been suppressed and had no one controlling it, and yet it was blocking transmissions that would inform Academy City of the danger.

Mikoto thought for a bit on what that meant, but her thoughts were cut off by Lessar.

Technically, it was by a noise coming from Lessar’s clothes.

She forced her hand down through the collar of her lacrosse uniform-like shirt.

“Oh, it seems I have my hands full with transmissions, too.”

“…Isn’t it a bit much to stick it there with that outfit?”

“Heh heh heh. They may not look it, but mine are big enough to hold something between them.”

“Shut up,” Mikoto snapped back.

At the same time, Lessar pulled her wireless device out.

But…

“Um…Why are you holding that piece of cardboard like it’s a cell phone?”

“There’s no need for you to know.”

Lessar made no attempt to explain why she looked so victorious.

“Hello, hello. Is this Bayloupe?”

“Yes. I’m currently on the roof of the grand hotel.”

Mikoto looked shocked. The cardboard vibrated and produced a human voice.

(??? Is that a cell phone made from some new material…?)

She thought it must be ecological, but she also thought it would be unsuitable for normal life. It seemed the corner would start peeling up if you messed with it.

“How are things at the hotel?”

“In regards to the rioting? Things are relatively calm here. It seems the shopping facility was the worst, but everyone has just been staring in disbelief ever since that strange giant wheel was rampaging around,” the girl who seemed to be named Bayloupe then changed the subject. “Can you see it from there?”

“See what?”

“One portion of the airport on the edge of the city just opened up. If it isn’t a pitfall for an elephant, it has to be a launch facility for a rocket or a missile.”

Mikoto and Lessar exchanged glances.

“A missile…? It isn’t related to the Solntse, is it?”

“If they could use multiple hydrogen bombs, they would have actually put them on the old fighters, don’t you think? They went out of their way to reuse the hydrogen bomb that they have no idea how far Academy City has dismantled, so they presumably only have one Solntse.”

“Which means…”

“A rocket?”

Mikoto thought for a bit.

What reason was there to launch a rocket that had not been turned into a weapon…?

“We still haven’t found whoever is truly behind this plan.”

“Then are you saying whoever it is has been cornered and is trying to escape using the rocket?” Lessar said with a puzzled look. “But what would they do even if they made it into space? Even if they managed to escape our reach, a spaceship that cannot resupply from a space station or something can only stay up there for a few days. And its expected landing spot can be calculated from the surface. In fact, a ballistic missile with a normal warhead could shoot it down. That method of escape is nothing more than cornering oneself further.”

“They would just have to never come back down to the earth,” said the girl who seemed to be called Bayloupe. “If whoever is behind this does not need supplies, that doesn’t matter.”

“I see,” Mikoto said cutting in. She politely matched the other two by speaking in British English. “So someone is acting in secret *to make us think* Code EIC is behind this.”

“They’re afraid of taking the blame themselves, so they’re making it look like it was all caused by an out of control computer. But there is a danger of their interference being detected if the computer is thoroughly investigated, so they’re having the computer escape the solar system so it cannot be investigated.”

“But isn’t the plan stored in the offline storage…?”

“I’m sure they’ve thought of that. They could have added some unnatural parts to the records to make it look like the records are just fakes Code EIC made to manipulate people.”

“Which means,” said Mikoto confidently, “whoever is truly behind all this is currently making preparations in the launch pad’s control room. If we capture whoever it is and get the whole story from them, we can wrap this whole incident up.”

Part 2

A machine that looked like a model aircraft flew through Japan’s capital.

It was not high enough to be said to be in the sky.

It cut through the wind at a height similar to a traffic light where it just barely made it by beneath power lines and overpasses.

It did not go unnoticed.

People who had the attention to spare looked up in confusion at the flying piece of machinery that gained its propulsion with a propeller.

It did not fit into the scenery crowded with buildings and people. It stood out. Most everyone who saw it was not sure if it was technically violating any set rule but still felt it was violating common manners.

But…

At the same time, no one saw it as a military weapon. It looked like nothing more than a toy.

In reality, precision machinery with a camera that could transmit information in real time was classified as military weaponry.

Most of what were called military satellites were only used for reconnaissance. They did not have anything like laser weaponry installed. Even that was known to the people in that country that had been dulled by peace.

Information could be used as a weapon.

In fact, it could be more useful than directly using a bullet or a bomb.

And that small aircraft held a string of numbers in it no longer than a bank account number that could blow away the city center by reviving the recovered hydrogen bomb.

Many people noticed the UAV as it headed in a straight line for Academy City.

It was predicted to arrive in thirty minutes.

As soon as it penetrated the city's outer walls, the entire city would be erased from the map.

Part 3

Enirya G. Algonskaya headed for a large helicopter sitting on the heliport. It had many antennae so that it could communicate in many different ways. It even had a means of accessing a communications satellite for cell phones.

“I was right,” she muttered to her colleague. “The electronic signatures used to declare martial law were not from the higher ups. They were created by a third party. Do you know what this means?”

“…”

Her colleague did not respond. It was not that he did not know; he simply did not want to admit it. That was why Enirya continued on for him.

“Some unknown person or persons currently hold authority over this city in place of the higher ups. Since the true higher ups are showing no sign of trying to stop this, they have likely completely left already. This third party may have directly forced them to leave or they may have left for some other reason.”

“The data came from the rocket launch facility.”

“This third party may have ordered us to stop the rioting with martial law so that the rioters would not interfere with whatever plan is being carried out there.” Enirya looked over at her colleague as they walked along. “Can you contact the launch facility?”

“The staff locked up the facility when the rioting broke out and evacuated to a safer underground area.”

“Well, I suppose that was the best decision. The launch facility is filled with fuel and oxidants, so any rioting there would have turned it into a sea of flames.”

“But that also means the area should be completely abandoned.”

“Yes, but we know *someone* is there,” replied Enirya. “Did the account search turn up anything?”

“If this result is correct, it is most likely this person.”

According to the information displayed in the window at their feet…

Part 4

Mikoto and Lessar entered one section of the international airport on the outskirts of the giant city known as the shopping mall.

It was a rocket launch facility.

In that city, space development may have been nothing more than another business through which to make money. However, Mikoto was not sure whether their service was to launch people or objects into space or to gather information from satellites that had been launched into space.

“Y’know…” Mikoto looked around the flat area as she ran. “This place reminds me of Academy City’s District 23. Why does everything have to be so damn huge when it comes to air and space!?”

“It seems there is more than one launch module.” Lessar showed no sign of fatigue as she ran alongside Mikoto. “There are 25 total. They’re laid out in a 5 x 5 pattern.”

“Do you know where the rocket with the core of Code EIC inside is?”

“According to what Bayloupe can see from atop the hotel, it’s the module in the fourth row and fourth column.”

“And where are we?”

“Row one column one.”

“We’re pretty much on the complete opposite side!! This is about the worst possible situation distance-wise!!”

As they spoke, the two girls dashed through the rocket launch area.

The launch modules were large circular holes opened in the ground. They were about 30 meters across and 30 meters deep. The edge of the holes had no railings, so they did not want to approach them. However, it seemed the rockets stood in the center of the circle and they were surrounded by crane-like devices that attached cables and tubes for data and fuel. The module Mikoto and Lessar circled around had all that minus the actual rocket itself.

Those giant modules were set up in a nice 5 x 5 layout.

Suddenly, Lessar realized something as she ran along and reached into her pocket.

It seemed she had received a transmission over that cell phone-like object made of cardboard.

“Hello, this is Floris. I’ve snuck into the center of the stock market center, and I found something interesting.”

“?”

“A part of the giant Code EIC computer has been removed like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. The missing piece is…I guess about the size of a small refrigerator.”

“I guess that piece was brought to the rocket.”

“Yeah, and I doubt the rectangular box just grew legs and walked off on its own. Although, I’m sure some people would insist it was carried by people being manipulated by Code EIC.”

“You said your name is Floris, right?” Mikoto cut in speaking English. “Since you’re in the stock market center, could you try to bring the phone lines back online? It seems the city’s phone system is set up to head outside after going through there, so that would be the most likely place for something to be set up.”

“I’m not too knowledgeable about that kind of thing.”

“Just do what you can. All I want is to see if you can get it back online and connected to the outside. Even if we gather information here, it can’t be used to intercept the UAV if I can’t get it back to Academy City. So just do what you can.”

“Understood,” she said and ended the transmission.

And in the next instant, another transmission arrived.

This time, it was from a different worker at the occult convenience store.

“Hee hee.”

But Mikoto did not know them well enough to know who it was just from a laugh.

“Hee hee hee. Nyu ha ha. I-it ticklesh…Nyahh.”

“Hello, who is this playing around in the middle of an emergency?”

“Lancis. Thish is Lancish. Nyuhu. Uuh, I can’t stand it. Magic power really does…tickle…”

Lancis continued muttered nonsensical things, but she slowly forced herself to calm down.

“Heh…heh. I received some new information from that cabal.”

“I’m surprised they told you anything.”

“Not from the people…nyuhu…I gathered the information left behind in that giant wheel snake.”

“But the cabal is not who is truly behind all this.”

“It seems they were…hee hee…gathering information from all over the shopping mall to see if anyone was going to get in the way of their plan.”

“And you found some information on who you think might be behind this?”

“It seems a French Academy City cooperative institution is deeply involved in all of this. Nyuha. A man named Peter Wellgo was invited here to see the #3’s demonstration, but it seems he had connections to the shopping mall’s higher ups beyond that.”

“Peter Wellgo…?”

Mikoto frowned and activated the Semipublic AR on the ground. A window opened like a shadow at her feet. She used a few tricks to access the data meant for Misaka Mikoto while using a different account and accessed the data on the demonstration.

She found the same name there.

He was one of the people who had been invited to view the demonstration as a representative of a cooperative institution.

“A cooperative institution?” said Lessar glancing over at Mikoto as they ran.

Mikoto nodded.

“Assuming that information was not put in there to intentionally throw us off track, it seems he is the person behind this. Even if the plan came to light and Academy City and the shopping center destroyed each other, the French cooperative institution could benefit by establishing a business model using the scientific information they have.”

It started with the oranges filled with crimson long-legged army ants and continued with the Code EIC report, the attack by remote controlled snowplows, the uranium ornament, and the establishment of a business model. Many people had been involved in that single large plan. There had not been a single “incident” or “criminal” and the plan had eventually left the control of the shopping center higher ups who had created it in the first place.

A lot had happened.

But they had finally come to the last person manipulating things from the shadows.

Peter Wellgo.

It was clear he was trying to load the core of Code EIC onto a rocket and launch it into space.

He likely knew the nuclear detonation code and the flight path of the UAV.

In other words…

“If we can capture this Peter Wellgo and get the details of the plan to Academy City, they can almost certainly shoot down the UAV and prevent the Solntse from detonating.”

“Wellgo came to the shopping mall with…nee hee…a few bodyguards, but he is likely the only one involved in this plan. He would want to keep his connections to the shopping mall as secret as possible so that the odds of blame falling on the French cooperative institution would be as low as possible.”

Suddenly, a pillar of flames erupted up from a launch module directly to their side.

The huge explosion filled the entire 30 meter width and depth of the large hole. The brilliant red pillar of flames reached well above Mikoto and Lessar’s heads. After reaching 50 meters above ground, it finally stopped its ascent and started spreading out in all directions.

“Wha—!? What is that!?”

“The liquid fuel in the launch area must have exploded! I don’t know if it was liquid oxygen or hydrogen though!!”

The shock of the explosion caused Lessar to drop her cardboard cell phone, but she did not turn back for it.

The flames overhead had already surpassed Mikoto and Lessar’s location creating a “ceiling” of flames.

“But that module didn’t have a rocket in it!!”

“To create an explosion with the fuel, you just need the supply tanks and pipes. I’m betting someone set it to detonate remotely!”

“So nothing is being done directly by humans to the end. By using the tools and equipment here, he can make it look like Code EIC is doing this.”

The ceiling of flames wavered.

The far end of it dropped as if it had finally recalled the existence of gravity.

“Isn’t that right, Peter Wellgo!?”

As Mikoto shouted, the ceiling of flames collapsed.

It turned into countless masses of blazing heat and rained down on the launch area as Mikoto and Lessar ran through it.

Mikoto ran and Lessar leapt, but they were not quite going to make it in time. They rolled across the AR ground and the flames filled the area just behind them.

The danger did not end there.

The hard ground was smashed by the vibration. Mikoto covered her face with both arms to protect it against the fragments and she could see a dazzling light make its way between her arms.

It was coming from one of the fuel pipes that had been buried in the ground.

The thick steel pipe had been partially torn up and was spraying flames around like a flamethrower.

“There’s more!! Above!!” Lessar yelled.

A container larger than a tanker truck was spraying out flames and falling down above Mikoto like a long throw in baseball.

But this time Mikoto did not panic.

After all, the pipe that was writhing around on its own was…

“It’s made of steel, so I can handle it!!” she shouted and used magnetism to forcibly bring the pipe to a stop.

She pointed the flamethrower-like opening straight upward and smashed it against the giant tank that was sending flames down.

The high temperature flames quickly raised the internal temperature of the tank.

Only one portion had burst, so it was spewing flames, but the entire tank then lit.

As a result, it exploded.

The new explosion in the air blew away the remains of the ceiling of flames that was still collapsing and raining down.

During it all, Mikoto and Lessar ran as quickly as they could.

The Semipublic AR on the ground must have been damaged by the flames because complex static spread across it.

Many launch modules had pillars of flames erupt out of them, many supply pipes were ripped apart, and flaming tanks attacked them like missiles.

But none of it stopped their advance.

They knew that continuing forward was the best way of protecting themselves from the continual fiery attacks.

“There it is!! Row four, column four!! The core of Code EIC is there!!”

“And so is Peter Wellgo!!”

The launch area was filled with the orange of the flames and the static of the broken AR as Mikoto and Lessar ran through it.

Holding a spear-like object, Lessar asked a question.

“Do you know where the entrance to the rocket launch facility is?”

“Row four, column four!! Didn’t your companion on the hotel tell you that!?”

“No, not that! That’s where the rocket is launched from. The door people go in and out of has to be somewhere else!!”

“This is all we need.”

Mikoto smiled and ran across the gray surface.

A giant hole was opened in the ground ahead of her like some kind of strange crop circle.

“If we jump in there, we’ll be exactly where we want to be!!”

She jumped in without hesitating.

The giant hole was 30 meters across and 30 meters deep. A large pillar stood at the center giving the hole a donut-like impression. A few cranes stretched in from the side connected to the central pillar either to prevent the pillar from collapsing or to pass in cables for data transfer.

It was the rocket.

Mikoto focused magnetism on the bottoms of her feet, ignored gravity as she jumped, and stuck to the side of the rocket. She then moved vertically down the side like someone skiing down a steep slope.

Sparks flew from her bangs.

Above her, Lessar peered over the edge of the hole and frantically yelled down at her.

“Most of the rocket is filled with liquid fuel!! If you make a careless attack, it’ll all blow up!!”

(I know that.)

Mikoto had no intention of blowing herself up and pure destruction was not going to resolve the current situation. She had to retrieve the core of Code EIC from the rocket in a state where it could be analyzed.

Mikoto slid down the side of the rocket. On the side of the cylindrical hole were many thick windows used to observe the rocket. Through them, giant pieces of equipment one would not see at an electronics store could be seen. They were likely used for control either during or after launch.

She saw a single figure amidst the equipment.

He was one of the people on the list of people who were to have viewed her demonstration.

He was Peter Wellgo.

It was her first time to see him, but Mikoto was naturally able to guess who he was.

And she did not hesitate.

“…!!”

She changed the flow of magnetism.

She pulled her body toward a steel door on the other side of the thick wall.

Her body flew horizontally.

A thick window made of reinforced glass stood in her way, but Mikoto ignored it and smashed through.

With a high-pitched shattering noise, she entered the facility.

The man within immediately tried to protect himself from the countless glass shards. As he covered his face with his hands and balled up, Mikoto “landed” directly on him. The shock had to have been more than from a simple body blow. She cut off her magnetism and knocked him to the floor so she was sitting atop him.

(He’s…?)

The man Mikoto had restrained seemed to be around 50. He was a tall white man. His pale blond hair had gray mixed in. He was wearing a high class custom suit, but he seemed to be using it to hide his muscles that were beginning to wither away with age.

“Checkmate, Peter Wellgo.”

Mikoto stuck her thumb toward the aging man’s throat and sent bluish-white sparks flying so that they almost reached his skin.

“I am here because I’ve seen through your plans. I know you are from a French cooperative institution. I know that you were supporting the shopping mall’s rebellion so that you could also benefit by establishing a business model using the scientific information you have. And I’m not stupid enough to think you’re really just being used by Code EIC."

"…"

"You put the main portion of Code EIC on that rocket and are trying to launch it into space so that it can't be investigated. But it's all over. Now, stop the rocket. If you don't, I'll have to physically destroy you personally with a high voltage current."

Mikoto felt it was finally over.

She did not think Peter could turn things around in that situation. From what she could see, no one else was hiding within the area, but she could still handle it if he did have subordinates hiding somewhere. It truly was checkmate. She would safely retrieve the computer core of Code EIC, get all the information from Peter, and get the information on the UAV heading toward Academy City. With everyone behind the plan gone, she could finally get a phone call through and tell Academy City the information they needed to destroy the UAV. A small craft that could be flying anywhere was one thing, but they would have no problem with a target that they knew the location of.

That was what Mikoto thought, but…

"…It wasn't me…"

An odd sound reached her eardrums.

It took her a second to realize it was a voice because it was so far outside of what she had expected.

Peter Wellgo spoke once more from his location on the floor.

"It wasn't me."

A smile was affixed on his face.

The smile made it look like small bugs were wriggling about under his skin about to rip the skin apart with their movements.

Mikoto had a thought.

Ignoring logic and calculations, her pure thoughts arose from the depths of her heart and formed words.

What is he saying?

Is he truly Peter Wellgo?

The aging man's words and atmosphere were so odd that she started to grow unsure of the assumption she had made. That doubt was spurred on by the fact that the man had never actually confirmed that he was Peter Wellgo.

But she could not let herself be led astray.

The French cooperative institution he belonged to would gain nothing by him telling the truth there. Peter Wellgo would choose to either remain silent or lie.

After all, the plan to destroy Academy City was still ongoing. Once the Solntse was detonated and the core of Code EIC was dealt with, the French cooperative institution could sip on the wine of victory.

(How am I supposed to get him to talk?)

Mikoto felt a strange sweat on her cheek.

(And even if he does talk, how am I supposed to determine if he's telling the truth!?)

At the same time, an explosive noise came through the shattered window.

It did not end with just one noise. The explosions continued on, one after another. The walls and ceiling vibrated violently since the soundproofed window had been lost. The din was much greater than that from road construction.

The rocket engine was beginning to ignite.

"…Stop it," Mikoto said.

She had thought she had reached checkmate, but she was the one trembling.

How were you supposed to defeat an opponent that continued playing even after their king had been taken?

“Stop the rocket!! I broke the window! If the rocket launches now, the flames and scorching wind will fill this room. If that happens, neither of us will survive. We’ll die!! Sending Code EIC into space now will not lead to a victory for you!!”

Hearing those words, Peter’s smile grew even wider.

Mikoto shuddered at the mere fact that a smile wider than the previous one even existed.

“…It isn’t my fault.”

His words were like a spell.

His twisted sense of legitimacy meant he would not give in even when faced with one billion volts or 2000 degree flames.

“It was all the machine. I was just a tool. We were all just used, so I can’t stop this.”

That must have been how he wanted it to be.

No matter what, that was the “truth” he wanted the world to see.

(He wasn’t doing this for the sake of his own life or position…)

Finally, Mikoto glimpsed what the conditions were for him.

(He just wants to bring prosperity to the French cooperative institution he belongs to and to keep all blame from falling on them. That’s all he wants. That’s all!!)

What was the cooperative institution to France?

Was Peter Wellgo a leader of the institution or was he just in charge of that mission?

She did not know the answer to any of that.

And she had headed to the conclusion of the incident with all that information lacking.

The shaking within the facility grew. The rocket would launch before long. Once it did, the materials that could prove who was behind the incident would be sent outside the solar system. Mikoto and Peter would be enveloped by flames without passing along any information on the hydrogen bomb or the UAV. When the UAV arrived, the Solntse within Academy City would detonate allowing those behind the incident to profit by establishing their business model.

She had to stop it.

But randomly attacking the rocket would just cause an explosion. That held the danger of roasting Code EIC, preventing any information from being retrieved. And more importantly, the explosion would kill Mikoto and Peter. The result would be the same.

(What do I do…?)

While still restraining Peter, Mikoto looked around.

The many control devices were lined up within the room. She knew a lot about computers, but even she did not know what to do with such specialized equipment. The rocket would not necessarily stop if she just ended the program.

(What do I do!?)

The rocket was beginning to launch and the UAV was about to head into Academy City.

There was no longer any time to spare.

And…

Part 5

The countdown reached zero.

The stabilizing cranes attached to the side of the three-stage rocket fell to the side, disconnecting one by one.

The mix of liquid oxygen and liquid hydrogen that acted as a fuel produced a huge amount of explosive power.

At the same time, a great amount of water was sprayed out like a shower from the side of the launch facility.

The water ensured that the high heat of the engines did not destroy the facility. The white gas that expands like cotton candy often seen in videos of launches was steam rather than smoke.

The rocket started to float up.

It was only a few centimeters, but it had definitely left the ground. The power of the multiple rocket engines was slowly lifting the rocket up. The first few dozen seconds was the most delicate time. Once it gained enough power to break free of the chains of gravity, no one could stop it.

A giant computer was loaded on the front.

No calculations to give it a stable orbit had been carried out.

The contents of the rocket merely had to be taken away from the earth.

The giant manmade mass started moving up more rapidly.

The thrust created by the rocket engines won out over gravity pulling the large mass toward the ground.

It looked as if it had suddenly been shot upward.

The three stage rocket violated one of the most basic phenomena of the planet as it headed for the sky as if it was being fired up by a rubber band.

And suddenly all light disappeared from the rocket engines that had been creating such massive amounts of energy.

It happened right after the three stage rocket made it about 5 meters into the air.

It suddenly stopped firing and the giant rocket was pulled by gravity back to the floor of the underground launch facility. The bottom of the engines were crushed and the main body of the rocket wobbled in its vertical position. Having lost its support, the giant vehicle was no longer able to keep its balance. It started to fall toward the side of the facility and the main body was bent when it struck the wall.

At the center where it bent, cracks appeared and white smoke poured out.

It must have been the liquid oxygen or liquid hydrogen used as fuel.

The fuels were only able to remain in their liquid state by being kept at temperatures lower than minus ten degrees. At normal temperature, they would immediately return to being a gas just like what flowed through the air.

"…"

Misaka Mikoto was standing facing the broken window.

Her palm was held out toward the launch facility.

"It's no use. That rocket cannot fly anymore."

For some reason, the rocket had failed to launch.

Or it had been stopped from launching.

However, Peter Wellgo's smile did not disappear as he lay collapsed on the ground. The rocket itself had fallen, but his plan was not completely done for. With such a crude means of stopping the launch, the liquid fuel was sure to ignite and explode. He could only speculate as to how advanced Academy City's analysis techniques were, but he was pretty sure Code EIC's core would be mostly unreadable after being exposed to high temperatures for long periods of time.

His 100% safety had only been lowered to 90% safety.

He would still win.

The hydrogen bomb attack on Academy City was still ongoing.

That city would be destroyed and they would have no way of determining that his cooperative institution had been behind it, so their business model could still be established.

It did not matter that the rocket exploding would kill him.

The end result would be a victory for Peter.

But…

"I told you: it's no use," Mikoto said, cutting off the aging man's thoughts. "The liquid oxygen and the liquid hydrogen will no longer explode. That is why the rocket cannot be launched or blown up. There is no way for you to win now."

At first, Peter did not understand what she meant and just stared at her blankly.

Finally, he noticed that nothing was exploding and his expression suddenly changed.

Just where did he get the extra strength from?

Peter Wellgo forcefully stood up and shoved his hand in his pocket. Bluish-white sparks flew from Mikoto's bangs and struck Peter, but the man did not stop. As he screamed, he threw something he had pulled out of his pocket. It flew through the broken window and out into the launch facility.

It was a lit oil lighter.

The lighter flew in a parabolic arc and fell down into the very bottom of the launch facility. A great amount of fuel that had leaked from the broken engines had to be gathered down there. Liquid oxygen and liquid hydrogen. The fuel had been prepared to provide explosive thrust even in areas with no air. It was enough to create an explosion large enough to instantaneously wrap the entire underground launch facility in flames.

But…

“Why…?”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“Why? Why is nothing happening?”

“It wouldn’t detonate even if you used a flamethrower. I made sure of that,” responded Mikoto lightly to Peter Wellgo who stood shuddering at the edge of the window. “The way rocket engines use liquid oxygen and liquid hydrogen is simple. Oxygen is needed for things to burn and the hydrogen that causes the explosive force is no exception. That’s why the liquid oxygen and liquid hydrogen are mixed to cause hydrogen explosions using oxygen even in places with no air.”

“…”

“And oxygen molecules can be easily broken down with electric power. When two oxygen atoms bind together, they create an oxygen molecule, but three create ozone. Needless to say, oxygen and ozone have different properties. A mixture of ozone and hydrogen will not ignite.”

Peter peered down into the launch facility.

The fire had disappeared from the oil lighter. The conditions needed for fire to burn were not met down there.

“Well, I can only just barely manage to pull off that method. When the entire launch area was burning before, I couldn’t deal with it and, more importantly, I might have ended up suffocating myself. But the bottom of a single module is sealed off to a certain extent, so it does not affect my own breathing.”

Mikoto wiped sweat off her face with the back of her hand.

“Your plan to launch Code EIC into space and leave the responsibility for this incident vague has failed,” said Mikoto as if stabbing the words into Peter. “Now, tell me everything you know about the UAV being used to detonate the Solntse. Where was it launched from, what route is it taking, and when will it enter Academy City? If we know that, we can intercept it. There is no longer any merit for you in attacking Academy City.”

“Heh.”

Peter Wellgo’s shoulders shook slightly.

He seemed to be laughing.

It happened immediately afterwards.

He did not even turn around.

He simply jumped straight out the broken window.

The action was as natural looking as a plastic bag being swept up in the wind. Due to that, Mikoto was a bit late in reacting. When she finally realized what was happening, Peter Wellgo had already disappeared from her vision.

“Kh…!!”

Mikoto frantically manipulated magnetism, but she failed to grab anything. She then heard an unpleasant noise.

She leaned out the window and looked down.

A human form was collapsed at the bottom of the module right next to the leaning rocket. He was not touching the puddle of leaked liquid fuel, but he was not moving and Mikoto could tell his life was slipping away.

Suddenly, she heard Lessar shouting from the top of the launch facility.

“The UAV has not been stopped yet!! The Solntse will detonate at this rate!! Hurry up and find what the UAV’s route is!!”

“But what about him!?” Mikoto yelled back. “There is no oxygen down there! A lighter cannot even remain lit! All of the oxygen molecules have been turned to ozone!! Even if he's still breathing, he won't last longer than a few minutes down there!!"

"Agh! Fine, then I'll get him!"

"How!?"

"I just have to do it without breathing, right!? I'll manage somehow!!"

After that somehow occult-sounding response, Lessar jumped to the wall of the launch facility. She then slid down to the bottom as if skiing. She showed no sign of suffering, so she must truly have had some way of "managing".

(The UAV's route…)

Mikoto thought.

Peter Wellgo had sealed off his information by defenestrating himself.

Was there anyone else who had a complete understanding of the incident and the UAV's route?

(Wait a second.)

Mikoto looked up and out the broken window.

Her eyes landed on the very end of the bent rocket.

(He was trying to put all responsibility on the core of Code EIC. In that case, it wouldn't surprise me if he put all the data on the incident inside the computer to make sure the disguise was perfect. He would have made sure there were records making it look like Code EIC itself had come up with and carried out the plan!!)

Peter had been afraid of Code EIC being recovered, but he would have tried everything he could. It was highly likely that the computer loaded on the rocket contained files on the incident.

Mikoto shouted out the broken window.

"Has that Floris girl contacted you!? Has she repaired the phone lines!?"

“I don’t know! I lost my communications spiritual i—uhh…communications device in the fire! And Floris already told you that she doesn’t know much about machines!!”

(Dammit. So I have to continue tightrope walking when I don’t even know if the other end is connected to anything!!)

Mikoto immediately began manipulating magnetism.

She jumped out the window and flew pretty much horizontally before landing on the side of the bent rocket.

She then ran for the top.

(Please make it in time….)

She pulled out her PDA.

She sliced through the armor at the top of the rocket with an iron sand sword to reach the computer within.

“Please make it in time!!”

Part 6

At the same time, the small UAV that had taken off in Tokyo Bay raised its altitude slightly.

It had to in order to cross Academy City’s outer wall.

The outer wall was made to emit a highly directed jamming signal pointed vertically in order to prevent information from being leaked.

As such, a signal sent from outside the walls would not reach anything inside Academy City.

The instant the UAV passed directly above the outer wall, its flight grew slightly unstable.

But the UAV continued flying while it shook.

It held the signal needed to detonate the hydrogen bomb within it.

The UAV took the final action needed to detonate the Solntse which had been recovered by Anti-Skill.

It passed the outer wall.

It passed the jamming signal.

The UAV entered Academy City. It reached an area where nothing would block its signal. The UAV had a clear connection to the Solntse.

And…

The explosion…

Part 7

Mikoto sat flat on the floor.

She was within the top of the rocket.

Her PDA was connected to the giant computer and a few pieces of information were displayed on the small screen.

She held a cell phone in one hand.

Odd-sounding static could be heard through it.

It was not a proper connection.

Mikoto used a cell phone about as frequently as any middle schooler in Japan, but this was the first time she had seen such an odd connection.

She could not hear any voices.

She could not sense any breathing on the other side.

She could not imagine what the scene was like on the other side.

It was if…everything had suddenly vanished.

"…"

For a while, Mikoto said nothing.

All strength left her body.

The PDA slid from her hand.

She just barely managed to hold on to the phone because she trusted her connection with the person on the other side.

And…

"…e…sama…"

Finally, she heard a voice coming through the phone.

But it sounded different from normal. It was extremely scratchy and hard to hear as if all moisture had been taken from the very depths of the speaker's throat.

The speaker was Shirai Kuroko.

She was giving her final report.

"The UAV…was successfully shot down… And…it was thanks to…the information you gave us…onee-sama…"

Hearing that, Mikoto finally remembered to breathe.

Meanwhile, Shirai sounded confused.

"But your voice…sounds very distant."

"That's probably because I'm not using a proper antenna."

As she spoke, Mikoto looked up at the sky through the opening she had created in the side of the rocket.

The cell phone in Mikoto's hand was not her own.

That one had fallen down from above in the middle of the countdown.

She had heard the sound of something repeatedly beating against the air above her.

She had looked up and seen a large helicopter circling around. From the Russian she could read on the side, it belonged to the security guards.

The helicopter's door had opened and Mikoto had recognized the face that stuck out.

(Enirya…was it?)

It seemed the woman had come that far following different information, but it had saved Mikoto and Academy City in the end.

The large helicopter was loaded with all sorts of communications equipment so that it could carry out investigations smoothly. It had antennae for things such as simple radio signals and also had a device that could access cell phone satellites.

Enirya had thrown down the cell phone and Mikoto had caught it.

Enirya may have determined she should help Mikoto because the helicopter had intercepted Mikoto's failed transmissions as she tried to get the information to Academy City during the countdown.

"So what's the situation?"

Just as Mikoto asked that, the sound quality became much clearer.

The helicopter's antenna may have performed some kind of adjustment.

"As you told us to before, the UAV approaching the outer wall was intercepted. The Solntse has shown no signs of being detonated. It seems unlikely, but it is possible that a second or third UAV could have been sent out at the same time, so the Solntse is being sent to a sealed off underground facility. Even if there is another UAV, it can no longer receive the signal."

"So for now the danger has been avoided."

"How are things on your end?"

"I've recovered the core of the Russian shopping mall's super computer, but it's a decoy. The person truly behind this is…"

Mikoto looked down over the edge of the rocket.

Lessar looked back at her while holding Peter Wellgo.

"Well, he's alive. If we ask him for the details, we should be able to get more info about the background to this whole situation. There seem to be some passionate security guards in this city, so it looks like this will clear all the suspicion that had been placed on me. It’s all over,” Mikoto said with a sigh.

The incidents surrounding the Russian shopping mall and the Solntse attack on Academy City were all over.

She felt more exhausted than refreshed.

The end of a real incident did not leave one with the same sense of achievement as the end of an RPG.

Part 8

“So in the end, what happened?” muttered a silver-haired girl named Bayloupe.

She was riding a small charter plane rather than a large passenger plane. It was currently waiting in a corner of the airport for its turn to use the runway.

A girl with black hair that had just the ends braided sat across from Bayloupe.

Her name was Lessar.

“What do you mean?”

“The end with the UAV, right?” added a blonde girl named Floris who was sinking into a massage chair. In annoyance, she pushed another girl, Lancis, off of her lap. “With Misaka Mikoto? That Japanese girl put up quite an effort, but did she really make it in time?”

“Right, right.” Bayloupe leaned against the wall. “Even though she got the UAV’s route out of Code EIC’s core and got the information to Academy City, would the defense units really move that quickly? After all, it’s just the word of a middle school girl. I doubt they would immediately send out all their forces.”

“Normally, they would act too slowly, the UAV would get its detonation signal out, and…boom!”

Bayloupe and Floris spoke back and forth, but then Lessar spoke up.

“Well, maybe that was their intention from the beginning.”

“?”

“Maybe the higher ups of Academy City had already predicted there were dangerous elements within the cooperative institution and they wanted an opportunity to draw them out. By carefully monitoring the Russian shopping mall, they could find all the dangerous people involved with the organization.”

“Which would mean…”

“Maybe they were constantly monitoring the whereabouts of the Solntse and the UAV using a different information source. By letting the situation develop as far as possible, they could see just how much strength the dangerous elements had. And as a result, they also managed to draw out another cooperative institution supporting the shopping mall. Not to mention actually capturing Peter Wellgo.”

“Uehh,” someone groaned.

“Would they really go that far for that?” asked Bayloupe.

“In that city, they would.”

“But the Solntse is a hydrogen bomb.”

“In Academy City, even that isn’t too much for them,” replied Lessar lightly. “I don’t know how sharp their higher ups are, but they might have been thinking about a possible future war between magic and science. This could be seen as an elimination of enemies on their own side before such a war begins.”

All four of them fell silent.

The word “war” weighed heavily on them.

“Well, if there is a war, Russia *would* be a likely candidate for the main battlefield.”

“And the other cooperative institution is from France, another dangerous location.”

“So they were laying the groundwork by getting rid of the unnecessary institutions before the fighting begins. With all the higher ups gone, this shopping mall will likely be completely shut down,” said Bayloupe with a grin. “I suppose we’re lucky no British cooperative institution was eliminated.”

“I wonder about that. At least our part in helping resolve this situation might help fool them a bit.”

Suddenly, Lancis spoke up for the first time.

She was twisting her body as if an invisible hand was tickling her side while she flipped through something like a small book.

“…Hee…hee hee. It found it.”

“?”

“The Coronation Sword. I…hee hee…just got a signal from the spiritual item…heh heh…automatically carrying out the excavation. It found it. It will…hee hee…start the actual exaction now, but this is most likely it. Heh heh.”

“Hmm,” Lessar smiled thinly.

It was a devilish smile.

It was a smile that indirectly showed that she was aware of her own ill will.

“If the revolution in England succeeds, I doubt the cooperation of Academy City will matter anymore, but we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. After all, we are a group that does what is best for England.”

They received permission to use the runway.

The pilot slowly moved the charter plane.

They arrived at one end of the straight runway and started accelerating for takeoff.

As the airplane took flight, Lessar said, “I guess we need to start seriously preparing for war.”

Part 9

“Onee-sama, can you still use your cell phone?”

“We haven’t taken off yet. It should be fine for another ten minutes or so.”

Mikoto was holding her cell phone within a passenger plane. The large plane seemed to be waiting for its turn on the runway. Currently, she could see a small charter plane taking off.

“But,” said Shirai Kuroko over the phone, sounding upset. “That Russian shopping mall is a terrible place. I can’t believe they would carry out terrorist attacks in order to establish a business model using their partial scientific knowledge! I can’t believe they would bring a hydrogen bomb here to do that! And I especially can’t believe they would chase you around trying to capture you!! Those security guards they have instead of police sound completely useless!”

“W-well, the security guards did their job at the end and cleared me of all suspicion. I don’t think there is any more need to find fault in them.”

“Of course there is!! The security guards are supposed to protect normal people like you, onee-sama! What they did at the end does not cancel out what they did before that!!”

Mikoto had a sudden thought as Shirai continued to shout over the phone.

She did not think Academy City was a paradise. She did not think the city held the burden of the entire world’s justice. But she was still quite shocked to find that clear enemies of Academy City had appeared.

Why was she so shocked?

Was she simply shocked at the mere fact that Academy City had enemies?

Or was she shocked at the realization that she had believed up until then that Academy City did not have enemies.

There was no such thing as a perfect system.

There was no system one could unconditionally rely on forever.

Just like the shopping mall, Academy City might have its own dark side.

It might have enough darkness to produce enemies like that.

“Hey, are you listening, onee-sama?”

“Yes, I’m listening,” Mikoto responded arbitrarily as she looked out the plane’s window.

She made a gun with her fingers and pointed it toward the land of Russia that she would soon be leaving.

“But, y’know, this really did become one hell of a demonstration.”